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# The Blessed Circle and Tales of Woe

Keynote Address given at the 2011  
BYU Women and Creativity Conference

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A book entitled *A History of Western Music* written by Donald Grout has been one of the primary textbooks for undergraduate music history classes for decades. Most music students refer to this book as simply “the Grout.” I read the first edition of the Grout as an undergraduate during the early 1970s. Now in its 8th edition, it remains in that lofty position as an undergraduate bible of music history. Like many undergraduates, I presumed that this book was presenting a broad and also an in-depth perspective. I went on to my master’s degree in violin and then my PhD in music history and my impression of the Grout remained unchanged. Thirty-one years ago I began my college teaching career, assigning the Grout to my own music history classes.

Now, I confess to you, with the benefit of hindsight, with the benefit of what I have learned since college, I am mortified to think that I did not ask my own professors, “Why are there no women composers in the Grout?” On the other hand, if I had asked my own professors, it is safe to assume they likely would not have been able to tell me about women composers. At the same time, it is utterly ridiculous to accept as fact that during 2000 years of western music history not one woman composer existed who was worthy of being included in the Grout.

Today, I’d like to tell you about my journey into the world of women composers—a journey that has transformed my life as an academic and as a musician.

The earliest woman composer I know about, thus far, is Inanna, who lived around 3000 BC. Since the time of Inanna, over 6000 women have composed along side

their male colleagues. I have done extensive research on some of them and what I have found leaves me with a sense of elation for knowing about them and their music, but I also have a deep sense of concern about how much work is yet to be done. I also have a sense of panic, because so much of their music, which sits ignored in libraries and archives, is deteriorating from neglect and age: some of their music is literally turning to dust.

Let's stick with the sense of elation for the moment—the glee of discovery. My journey out of ignorance and naiveté began in the unlikely venue of Walla Walla, WA. Over 20 years ago I was searching for some new music to perform, so I browsed through dictionaries of composers to get some ideas. I ran across this information: Marion Bauer, woman composer, born in Walla Walla, WA. That certainly caught my eye. By that time I had been teaching at Whitman College for a decade and I had never heard her name mentioned. I wondered just how mediocre her music was, because surely if she were worthy she'd be in the Grout, at least in the appendices. Then I noticed that Marion was born on August 15: that's my birthday. Then I read that one of her orchestral works was performed by the New York Philharmonic in Carnegie

Hall, conducted by Leopold Stokowski—one of the great conductors of the 20th century. Ah, now I was sure that at least one of her pieces was worthy. Thus began my journey into the world of women composers. Thank you, Marion, you changed my life.

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of Marion's works for piano. So I'd like to tell you a bit more about her. First, you need to know that she lied about the year she was born. Virtually every book that mentions her says she was born in 1887 because that's what she claimed throughout her adult life. She was really born in 1882—the 7th child of French-Jewish immigrants. After Marion graduated from high school, she joined her older sister in New York City. The older sister was a respected music critic in New York, and was able to open doors for Marion that might have been otherwise shut. Marion studied composition in New York and she also studied extensively in Europe. When she was in her 20s and 30s her compositions received lofty reviews and she had no difficulty getting them published. By the time she was in her 40s she was arguably the premiere American woman composer. Although Marion never went to college, she became an assistant professor of composition at New York Univer-

sity, where she remained until her retirement in 1951. Supposedly she was retiring at the mandatory age of 65, whereas in reality she was 69 years old. By the way, she split the difference on her own gravestone, which shows her birth year as 1884.

Did Marion Bauer face gender bias during her lifetime? From what I can tell, not too often. She did receive some odd backhanded compliments. For example, a music critic wrote about her violin sonata, “This [piece] is one of the most distinguished products of our American composers—and it is the work of a woman!” About Marion’s string quartet, another critic wrote, “Those who like to descant upon the differences between the intellect of woman and that of man must have found themselves in difficulties while listening to Miss Bauer’s quartet. It is anything but a ladylike composition. This does not mean that it is rude, impolite or vulgar, but merely that it has a masculine stride and the sort of confidence which is associated in one’s mind with the adventurous youth in trousers.” This is typical of the language of reviews of music by women composers: if a piece is deemed worthy, it’s almost always characterized as “virile.”

In the music history books that do mention Marion, the reader is led to believe that she composed about 60 pieces—mostly short piano pieces and songs. In reality, she composed at least 160 pieces. I have found these misrepresentations to be very common in mainstream music history textbooks. Supposedly knowledgeable music historians make assumptions about women composers, students read those assumptions and take them as fact, and the myths perpetuate themselves.

Are the Grout and its competitors in the textbook industry doing better these days? Yes, a bit better. There have been glitches along the way. For example, the American composer Amy Beach was included for the first time in the 2001 edition of the Grout, where she was introduced as the wife of a Harvard surgeon. Howls of disbelief and disdain from academia forced a second printing of that edition. Then, one famous and influential music historian defended the way Amy Beach had been introduced when he said, “It is a common rhetorical gambit to introduce a person by way of another’s influence or encouragement, especially when that encouragement is viewed as unusual, as in the case of a husband supporting a wife’s desire to compose, at a time when relatively few women were involved in such activities.” Are we supposed to be grateful that Amy Beach was finally included in the Grout, only 57 years after her death. Grateful? I don’t think so. Not when it’s done so poorly.

I have spoken about two American composers so far, who fared relatively well during their lifetimes. What about European and Scandinavian women composers?

What about Clara Schumann? You know her—she's Robert Schumann's wife. During her lifetime Clara Schumann fared much better than most European women composers. As both a pianist and composer she was a child prodigy. One of her compositions was published when she was only 11 years old. She was engaged as a concert pianist throughout Europe and Russia and European publishers did not shun her music as they did many women composers, probably because Clara's fame meant good sales of her music. Mind you, Clara's life was quite bleak in some ways. She gave birth to 8 children in 13 years. She outlived 4 of her own children. Her husband went insane. One son was a morphine addict, another was schizophrenic. She had to raise some of her grandchildren. Through all of this, she still performed and composed. After her death in 1896, almost all of her music went out of print. But now, almost all of it is back in print and available on recordings.

Clara Schumann was the *only* female composer mentioned in the 5th edition of the Grout. She is actually mentioned three times in the text; I'll take a moment to read to you these entries.

1. (p. 670) "Some of [Robert] Schumann's *Lieder* are the love songs; in 1840, the year of his long-delayed marriage to his beloved Clara . . . , he produced over 100 *Lieder* . . ."
2. (p. 670–71) "[Brahms] made arrangements of many German folksongs, including a set of 14 dedicated to the children of Robert and Clara Schumann."
3. (p. 681) "The best . . . performers of piano music in the nineteenth century tried to avoid the two extremes of sentimental salon music and pointless technical display. Among those whose style and technique were primarily determined by the musical substance . . . were Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Brahms, and Clara Wieck Schumann."

Let's see—what's missing here? Oh, yes, the Grout forgot to mention that she was a composer. I am happy to report that the most recent edition of the Grout does correct this deficiency.

Did Clara Schumann face gender bias during her lifetime? Not much, from what I can tell—as either a pianist or as a composer. What is interesting is that she imposed bias onto herself. In her diary she wrote, "I once believed that I had creative talent, but I have given up this idea; a woman must not wish to compose—there never was one able to do it. Am I intended to be the one? It would be arrogant to believe that." It appears that Clara Schumann did not know any of the music of the 2000 women composers who had preceded her. Fortunately, she did not stop composing.

That brings me to an important point. If we agree that having role models and mentors in the arts is often important for developing skills, self-awareness, and self-esteem, women composers have been at a distinct disadvantage—not because there haven't been women composers all along—but because they are sucked into what I call the black hole of women composers. It's an odd and vicious cycle. Hildegard was lauded as a wonderful composer during her lifetime in the 12th century. When she died, her music was buried with her until its revival 800 years later. Francesca Caccini was the first woman to write an opera in the early 17th century; she was celebrated during her lifetime, and then her music had to wait 400 years to be revived. Elizabeth La Guerre was the protégé of Louis 14th and 15th. Her music was performed at their court. She also composed an opera, and she claimed to be the first woman composer of opera—so she didn't know about her female predecessor in Italy who 75 years earlier had already composed an opera. The 19th century French composer Louise Farrenc thought she was among the first women symphonic composers, so she didn't know that Mozart's sister had composed symphonic works during the preceding century.

[This is] the black hole of women composers—sometimes celebrated during their lifetimes and then sucked out of history as though they never existed

That is what I mean about the black hole of women composers—sometimes celebrated during their lifetimes and then sucked out of history as though they never existed—not privy to their predecessors who might have provided role models and inspiration.

How do we know that women composers were sometimes celebrated during their lifetimes? I often look to obituaries. And the accumulation of those obituaries has provided in their own peculiar way, comic relief. From the 18th century forward, one obituary after another celebrates the world's first and only woman composer. After I had collected a couple of dozen of these obituaries, the humor began to set in—punctuated by the tragedy.

Did some women composers face blatant gender bias? Absolutely. Take Elfrida Andrée, for example. She was a 19th century Swedish composer of about 100 pieces, including 2 symphonies and an opera. She was also an organist. She was educated at the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm, but as an external student—she was not allowed to be a bona fide organ and composition

student at the academy because she was a woman. Nonetheless, at age 17 she passed all of the examinations and she was as well educated as her male counterparts. Now Elfrida wanted to be a cathedral organist. The problem was that a long-standing Swedish law forbade women from being cathedral organists. Why? St. Paul said that women must be silent in the church, and the Swedish parliament had decided St. Paul's edict should apply to organists. Elfrida fought 4 years to have the law changed, and was finally successful—well, sort of. The new Swedish law said unmarried women over the age of 25 could now be cathedral organists. Elfrida Andrée was unmarried, but she was only 21 years old—and yet, she did get a position as a cathedral organist. I don't know why she was granted this exception—possibly to get her out of the Swedish parliament's hair. A few years later she auditioned for one of the most important cathedral jobs in Gothenburg and won the position that she retained until age 88. Another example of gender bias that she faced was when her first symphony was premiered in Stockholm. Some members of the all-male orchestra were incensed they had to perform a symphony written by a woman and during the performance the entire first violin section entered one measure late—and continued to play in the wrong place throughout the movement. The music critics who reviewed the concert did not know what was happening and severely criticized the work as chaotic noise. Nonetheless, Elfrida Andrée did enjoy some success and fame during her lifetime. She was voted into the Swedish Academy of Arts at a fairly young age. After her death in 1929, the manuscripts of her 100 compositions languished in the Royal Library for 70 years before being revisited by modern musicians. She'd be pleased to know that at the Nobel Prize ceremony a few years ago, a movement of one of her symphonies was performed.

In a few minutes you'll be hearing Stephen Beus perform music by the 20th century French composer named Marguerite Canal. She won the famous Prix de Rome composition prize in 1920 and subsequently wrote several outstanding works. Within a few years she married a music publisher. The combination of her talent and having a built-in publisher seemingly would allow her music to be widely disseminated. That was true for a few years. Then, when she divorced her husband, he claimed he owned the copyrights on her compositions and she had to take him to court to reclaim her own music. She won that battle. But she lost the war. You see, he apparently convinced French music publishers to blackball his former wife, and she could not publish her works that she composed during the height of her career. Those manuscripts still exist—they are housed at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. However, Marguerite Canal did not leave a will stating that her works should be considered in public domain. And she did not have any close relatives alive at the time of her death. When I asked the Biblio-

thèque for copies of her manuscripts, they said I needed permission from her estate. I hired a private detective to see if he could find perhaps a distant relative so that I could establish an estate, but to no avail. I got a legal document showing that the Marguerite Canal estate didn't even exist, and still, the Bibliothèque responded that I needed permission from her estate. There is a legal term for this, Marguerite's compositions are called "orphans"—and laws in the United States are now changing to grant access to orphan works—but that doesn't help Marguerite Canal's music. What we do have available to us is several solo piano works and a violin sonata that were published before the divorce, and they serve to whet our appetite for what lies silently in the library.

You can see, then, that the music of women composers is sucked into the black hole for more than one reason. Still, the overarching theme here is that they are women, women aren't supposed to compose, so once they die, their music dies with them. At least that was true

until recently. There are several researchers doing the sort of music recovery I do—working to bring back what has been lost to us, sometimes for hundreds of years. It's sometimes tedious work. To create a critical edition of just one big chamber work or symphony takes months. Given that Elfrida Andrée composed over 100 pieces, her music alone represents a lifetime of work. And she is only one of the 6000 women composers who deserve a second look through modern sensibilities.

Let's return now to Louise Farrenc, whose symphony you heard at the beginning of this session. She was admired during her lifetime as both a pianist and a composer. When she died in 1875, one obituary said, "without question she is the most remarkable of all women who have devoted themselves to musical composition. Her works bear witness to a power and richness of imagination as well as to a degree of knowledge which have never before been the attributes of a woman." Among the many women composers I have studied, Louise Farrenc stands out among the best, and yet her three symphonies sat unknown and unheard in a library for 150 years. Now that Farrenc's symphonic and chamber works had been brought out in excellent recordings, I thought that when the 8th edition of the Grout was coming out, Louise Farrenc might be included. I asked the senior editor of the Grout at that time whether this was the case. He responded, "I'm afraid Louise Farrenc has not yet made it into [the] Grout/Palisca Blessed Circle. But I'm copying this message to your Norton sales representative who will make sure you receive a copy of the book." No thanks, I responded.

[Women composers are thus] not privy to their predecessors who might have provided role models and inspiration.



I now teach a class on women composers. One of the most frequent questions from students is “How do you find the music of these composers?” When I first started looking for Marion Bauer’s music—pre-internet days—I was quite lucky. Much of her music is in the Library of Congress and New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. However, when I asked the libraries for copies of her manuscripts, I was told I needed permission from Marion’s estate and they gave me the name of the person. Easy, I thought. My letter to that person was returned to me stamped “deceased” and so too was the letter I sent to his wife. I tracked down their nieces and nephew, who were now lawfully in charge of the Bauer estate. None of them were musicians. “Why do you want copies of the music?” they asked. “To perform it,” I responded. “No!” they said. For reasons I don’t understand to this day, performing Marion’s music was not to be permitted. I could feel Marion rolling over in her grave. I waited several months for them to forget my request and made a second request. “Why do you want copies of her music?” they asked. “To study it,” I responded. “Yes!” Permission was granted. Now I had perhaps 75% of Marion’s music. What about the other 25%?

The most important missing manuscript was that of Marion’s work *Sun Splendor* that was performed by the New York Philharmonic. I tried to put myself in the shoes of Harrison Potter, the person who was designated in her will to “take care of” her music. He had been a musician. He was Marion’s close friend. He would have known the importance of that manuscript. What would he have done with it? Maybe he kept it for himself! Maybe it’s now in the archive at Mt. Holyoke College where he taught. I checked. They said no. I was so sure that I flew there to see for myself. Sure enough, they had it—under “P” for Potter rather than “B” for Bauer. I also hoped to hear the only recording of the piece by the New York Philharmonic. I contacted their sound archives and asked for a copy of the recording. No! Musician union rules prohibit making copies of it. I had to fly to New York, sit in the sound archive to hear it. Finally, 20 years after first reading about the piece I heard it.

The reason I have mentioned so much detail here is to allow you to grasp the scope of tracking down one piece by one composer. And there are 6000 more composers!

The search for the music of other composers has sometimes been easier. All of Louise Farrenc’s music is at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris—except for her string quartet, which they have apparently lost. All of Elfrida Andrée’s music is beautifully preserved in Stockholm. In other instances a search is seemingly fruitless. For example, in Louise Hérítte-Viardot’s autobiography she tells us she

composed 300 pieces; only a handful have been found. Tracking down her great-granddaughter in Switzerland proved fruitless. She was seemingly unaware of her great-grandmother's legacy.

When I do find music, what condition is it in? Sometimes wonderful. Other times ink has dried out over centuries and chipped off the paper. In music notation, that means what was a quarter note now looks like a half note. Ink has faded. Paper has started to crumble. That is why I mentioned a sense of panic earlier. The deterioration of this music is sometimes profound. Twenty years from now some of it may not even exist. Time is of the essence. What should be done?

A major breakthrough is conceivable if mainstream music history texts include the *crème de la crème* of women composers, like Louise Farrenc. Knowledge breeds enthusiasm, and that promotes research.

Will this happen? The grandiose entitlement evident in the phrase "Groux Blessed Circle"—and the stranglehold it represents on young, impressionable minds—is formidable.

To conclude on a much more upbeat note, having world-class artists such as Stephen Beus perform this music for the broader public is a marvelous counterweight to those who would deny women composers their voice.