

# Music by Women: An Intentional Choice

Sharon Mabry



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**T**HE ARTICLE YOU ARE READING was written as 2008 drew to a close, long before its publication date. Like many NATS colleagues, this writer had a stack of reading materials that was being devoured before a new school term would begin in January. On top was the November/December 2008 issue of the *Journal of Singing* that included a number of interesting articles. But one, in particular, prompted a physical, psychological, and emotional response so strong that the subject originally designated for this issue of “New Directions” had to be shelved for the one you now read.

The article to which I refer is “The Women Composer Question in the 21st Century” by Eileen Strempele. It is a concise, thought provoking, insightful, educational piece that brings out salient statistics concerning the current status of women composers. Their educational opportunities and acceptance in American musical culture are discussed in light of research and interviews with some of today’s major composers. A shorter article, but similar in tone, was published in the “New Directions” column in September/October 2002. It was titled “What to do About Women Composers.” One could say, “Why write another one?” As a matter of course, this column regularly includes information about works by women. But old ground will not be covered here. The appalling statistics concerning performance opportunities for the music and the lack of knowledge and recognition of major and lesser known composers documented in the two articles mentioned above stand for themselves. It is obvious that music by women still receives far too little attention by symphony orchestras, university curricula, performers, teachers, and major arts organizations. The articles mentioned above can be referenced for that information.

Why is this still happening and what can we do about it? Primarily, the dialogue and mindset about the situation must shift. It seems that a key element is missing: intention to make a change. We all are very busy, but each day we make choices concerning what we teach, read, sing, listen to, and support, both musically and intellectually. Consider that the effect of every intention we make is extremely powerful, shaping our lives and those of the students we teach, the colleagues with whom we work, and the atmosphere around us. In order for the music of women composers to become mainstream and a natural part of America’s musical fabric, individuals must determine mentally to promote it and follow through with action in order to get results. Teachers, performers, arts managers, and audience members can affect change in myriad ways. But in order to produce significant, lasting re-

sults, each person must take responsibility for creating momentum that will become interactive and point beyond a single person or event. For instance, simply adding one or two token songs by a female composer to a student's repertoire does not allow for growth of the student's knowledge of women composers, in general.

We must stop approaching this subject with an attitude of regret that there "should" have been a piece by women on a given concert. We shouldn't feel "grateful" to see such a piece listed or think that it was "nice" to have it there. Instead we should "expect" women to be represented on mainstream programs by students, artists, major symphonies, and other organizations. This attitude change can make a great deal of difference to the proliferation of works being presented.

How can the intention to make a change be realized? The possibilities are limitless, but here are some quick ideas on how you can get started thinking about making an effective impact on the current dismal situation.

1. Have specific performance goals, such as: perform works by women composers on each concert program of your own, or discuss the music of women in a lecture-recital format.
2. Include the subject in teaching: give pieces by women to every student in your studio or include a large

representation of music by women in literature classes and music history classes that you teach.

3. Encourage students to do research on this subject, especially at the undergraduate level where they can be most influenced.
4. Channel your efforts and don't apologize for your intention. Be absorbed, purposeful, and steadfast, moving forward in a determined fashion and don't be distracted by the negativity of others toward the subject.
5. Don't segregate the music of women. Women's History Month and Women's Music Festivals have been around for some time and have had limited overall impact in changing the culture. They are much needed, but ultimately, it is more important for the population of students and audience members to think of the music as being a normal part of concert offerings, not something that is strange and may never be heard again.
6. Be curious and seek out women composers in your area for commissions, campus visits, and student lectures. Encourage student women composers by using their music on student recitals when applicable.
7. Involve others in your intentions. Propose ideas for collaborations. Be communicative about the sub-

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ject, but don't press. It will be enough for colleagues, students, accompanists, and arts coordinators to be infected by your enthusiasm.

8. Become an activist at the smallest level. Don't worry about doing too little. To move an inch is better than to move not at all.
9. Cure boredom and invigorate current projects or repertoire with an infusion of new works that stimulate and delight the naturally curious part of your creative self. Choose music that appeals to you, music that you "like." Don't choose something just because it or the composer is well known. That could defeat your purpose and deflate your interest.
10. Speak up when you can have an influence on the programming of symphony orchestras to which you hold season tickets or chamber groups whose concerts you regularly attend. Gently suggest to guest artists who present no music by women that you would love to hear something by a woman composer next time. If enough people respond in that way, more music will be included.

It may be difficult to judge the impact you are having at the center of your intention, but the ripple effect will be broadcast over a large area and produce amazing results. Individual power to influence collective thought and action has great potential to bring acceptance for something that is currently rarely thought of or acted upon. We can wait no longer. Intend to make a difference for music by women. It is in the best interest of the student, our educational system, and the American culture as a whole.

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Mezzo soprano **Sharon Mabry** first received national recognition in the 1980 National Public Radio *Art of Song* series, when she was a featured recitalist. She has performed at international music festivals and is in demand as a recitalist and master teacher of vocal techniques. Her recordings have received outstanding critical acclaim and international exposure. Her latest CDs feature music by American composers, Elizabeth Vercoe, Mary Howe, Persis Vehar, Christina Kuzmych, Kenton Coe, Jeffrey Wood, and Michael Rose.

In 1986 she made her critically acclaimed New York recital debut in Merkin Concert Hall, Abraham Goodman House. She was awarded both a Solo Recitalist Fellowship and a recording grant by the National Endowment for the Arts. In addition to her concert career, Dr. Mabry is professor of music at Austin Peay State University, Clarksville, TN. She received the Bachelor of Music degree from Florida State University,

studying with Elena Nikolaidi, and the Master of Music and Doctor of Musical Arts degrees from George Peabody College for Teachers, studying with Louis Nicholas. As a scholarship recipient to the Franz-Schubert-Institut in Austria, she studied with Walter Moore, Erik Werba, Hans Hotter, Norman Shetler, and Brigitte Fassbaender. Mabry's book, *Exploring Twentieth Century Vocal Music: A Practical Guide to Innovations in Performance and Repertoire*, was published by Oxford University Press in 2002.

Joyful lady, sing!

And I will lurk here listening,  
Though nought be done, and nought  
begun,  
And work-hours swift are scurrying.

Sing, O lady, still!

Aye, I will wait each note you trill,  
Though duties due that press to do  
This whole day long in unfulfil.

“—It is an evening tune;  
One not designed to waste the noon,”  
You say. I know: time bids me go—  
For daytide passes too, too soon!

But let indulgence be,  
This once, to my rash ecstasy:  
When sounds nowhere that carolled air  
My idled morn may comfort me!

Thomas Hardy 1840-1928)

“To A Lady Playing and  
Singing in the Morning”