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### **The Unwritten Chapters: Perspectives on Female Composers**

Prior to the twenty-first century, female composers were not trained, supported, or recognized to the same extent as their male counterparts. For example, everyone knows about Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791). His father, Leopold Mozart (1719-1787), dedicated his life to Wolfgang's musical career, but it's often forgotten that Maria Anna Mozart (1751-1829), Wolfgang's older sister, also showed great musical talent as a child. Maria Anna received little encouragement for a musical career, as Wolfgang composed and toured Europe as a child for royals and nobles.

There are few female composers who are recognized for their compositions, roles, and contributions in music. Although few in number, their stories raise the question: if female musicians throughout western music history had received the same level of support and education in music, would the history of western music be less male-centric, and give more recognition to women?

Hildegard von Bingen (1098 - 1178), is regarded today as one of the twelfth century's greatest composers, as her innovative works did not follow the typical style of the music of the time. She was a composer whose many other important roles in society, and most specifically, her roles within the Roman Catholic Church, are what made her compositions some of the most notable pieces of literature of the century. The church provided a rich and creative environment for her to write and perform her music on festivals and holidays. According to musicologist

James Briscoe, “To her, serving God was foremost; her most striking ways of doing so was through writing music” (7).

In one of Hildegard’s antiphons, “*O Frondens Virga,*” (“Oh blooming branch,”) we see how Hildegard’s music did not conform to the linguistics and musical phrasing of the time. Her compositions highlight elasticity and freedom in phrasing. She preferred a melismatic style with many notes on a single syllable, rather than more text and less musical movement. It is important today that we continue to recognize just how advanced Hildegard von Bingen was for the twelfth century.

Francesca Caccini (1587 - 1630), was based primarily in Florence, Italy. Her compositions were a direct continuation of the Baroque style her father, Giulio Romolo Caccini (1551-1618), is credited for creating. This ‘new music’ of the time was dominated by a solo vocal line with piano, or more popularly during the sixteenth century, harpsichord accompaniment. Caccini may be primarily recognized as a pioneer in the advancement of her father’s composition style, however it is important to not forget her own accomplishments as a composer and musician. She was the composer of the first Italian opera to be given outside Italy. In 1607, she took a post at the prestigious Florentine court, and by the 1620s, became the highest paid musician in the Florentine court. According to musicologists Julie Anne Sadie and Rhian Samuel, “Her abilities as a teacher and composer are universally remembered as remarkable” (97).

Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel (1805 - 1849), was based in Hamburg, Germany. In the past century, Fanny has been recognized as a leading contributor to German art-songs known as *lieder*. However, this was not always the case. Fanny Mendelssohn was the eldest of four children, and had a special relationship with her brother, Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847).

According to James Briscoe, “They often challenged each other musically and played important roles in shaping each others’ compositions” (113). As Felix was receiving full support from their family for a career in music, Fanny was not. In total, Fanny wrote around 500 musical compositions including literature for piano, chamber music, cantatas, and oratorios. But we must not forget, Fanny Mendelssohn’s first publications appeared under her brother, Felix’s, authorship. And even without the approval and support of family, Fanny continued to compose, to where finally, an entire volume titled “Six Songs for One Voice with Piano Accompaniment,” was published officially under her own name in 1846, only two years before she died. Through perseverance and dedication to a career as a published composer, Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel should be remembered today as an integral contributor to German Lieder.

Nadia Boulanger (1887 - 1979), was one of the twentieth century’s leading teachers of musical composition. Nadia was a student at the Paris Conservatoire, where she studied music theory, organ, and composition with the acclaimed composer Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924). Nadia did compose, however, after her younger sister Lili Boulanger (1893-1918), died in 1918, she stopped composing completely and dedicated the rest of her career to conducting and teaching. She then became one of the most influential music educators of her time. According to author, Clemency Burton-Hill, “Her roster of music students read like the ultimate Twentieth Century Hall of Fame. Leonard Bernstein, Aaron Copland, Quincy Jones, Astor Piazzolla, Philip Glass, Elliott Carter, and Louise Talma” (1). She was the first woman to ever conduct a symphony orchestra at the Royal Philharmonic Society in London in 1937 and thereafter, also conducted the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. It’s clear that without Nadia Boulanger, we wouldn’t have some of the twentieth and twenty-first century’s greatest composers.

Younger sister, Lili Boulanger (1893 - 1918), lived a short life crippled by childhood illness. However, this did not stop her from becoming one of the most notable composers of the early twentieth century. In 1909, after officially being diagnosed with what is now known as Crohn's Disease, she dedicated the rest of her life to composing and competing in the reputable Prix de Rome. According to Julie Anne Sadie and Rhian Samuel, "Influenced by impressionism, Lili had a personal and innovative harmonic language that in the end, led her to be the first woman to win the Prix de Rome with her *Faust et Helene* in 1913." (77) At only twenty years old, this outstanding achievement resulted in a publishing contract with the firm Ricordi, where she then went on to publish works mainly for piano, voice, chorus, and orchestra. Lili Boulanger's ability to win prizes and receive a major publishing contract was unheard of for women in the early twentieth century.

Today, it is more important than ever to recognize the female composers who are receiving awards, commissions, and contracts. Some of these women include Jennifer Hidgen (b.1962), with her exceptional contemporary Classical works, and Joan Tower (b.1938), with her unique and innovative orchestral and instrumental compositions, as well as, Niloufar Nourbakhsh, from the Goucher class of 2014. This year, Nilou was a winner of the Hildegard Competition, "a premiere competition for emerging female, trans, and nonbinary composers" (Emerson). She and many other female composers continue to prove that women, if given the proper support and education in music to the same extent as their male-counterparts, can accomplish great achievements that deserve recognition inside music history classrooms.

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