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Female Composers Seeking Parity



Roberta Hershenson

A group of Westchester members of New York Women Composers. From left: Karen Campbell, Elizabeth Bell, Robert Friou, attorney and administrator, Jane Hart, Ruth Berman Harris and Ruth Schonthal.

By ROBERTA HERSHENSON

WHEN Elizabeth Bell was in college in 1950, she was told that women couldn't be composers. "Women don't have the strength," a teacher said.

"That made me so mad I decided I had to do it," declared Ms. Bell, who has since produced an impressive list of musical compositions, including a symphony.

Karen Campbell, who is now 32 years old, heard another view as a student writing music. "My teacher said, 'Don't you ever become a housewife and have children and stop composing.'" Ms. Campbell got married, but she has continued to compose chamber music as well as scores for modern dance companies.

The attitude toward women in music, as in other fields, has changed greatly in recent years, but many women who compose still perceive a lag in their acceptance as serious artists. Although women no longer must

put men's names on their compositions, as did earlier composers like Amy Beach and Lili Boulanger — not to mention Fanny Mendelssohn (sister of Felix) — some say there is a dearth of performance and publishing opportunities.

The problem is compounded by a difficulty facing all contemporary composers, male and female: that of persuading a generally conservative audience of music lovers to try some new music with their Mozart and Mahler.

Composers' organizations such as

the county-based Purchase Music Ensemble sponsor concerts, provide a communications network and offer social support to those writing music in relative isolation. New York Women Composers, a three-year-old group based in New York City, with 10 members in Westchester, is further committed to enabling works specifically written by women to be heard.

The need for a group for women both unites and angers its members. Ruth Schonthal, a prolific composer and pianist from New Rochelle whose work has been widely performed, called New York Women Composers "an important milestone for everybody." At the same time, she said, "We'd rather have no need for this.

perceive and get the ball rolling."

The New York State Council on the Arts, an important source of funds for music projects, has put teeth in the struggle to eliminate discrimination against women in the music field. Citing 1987 and 1988 published guidelines that call for affirmative action regarding the work of women, minorities and the disabled, Paul Martinez, a music program associate with the council, said: "We are trying to create some parity and to make amends for the past, when work by women and others was neglected." New York Women Composers has a council grant this year to advertise in music magazines works written by women.

Ms. Schonthal estimated that there were 8,000 to 10,000 composers of concert music in the United States, about 2,000 of whom were women. "There has been a lot of good music lying in the closet," she said. She defined a composer as someone who writes "a minimum of 30 to 45 minutes of music a year."

New York Women Composers has taped three half-hour programs for cable television; Mr. Friou was a co-producer and cameraman. A computer catalogue of members' works is being compiled, and plans are under way for exchange concerts with composers' organizations in other parts of the country, not necessarily women's groups. Earlier this month, the New York group sponsored a well-received program of works by one of its charter members, Ursula Mamlock, at Merkin Concert Hall in Manhattan.

It is up to individual members to bring their own compositions to the attention of orchestra music directors. The New Orchestra of Westchester, which is committed to giving exposure to county artists, will perform works by two area women this season. (The orchestra's emphasis is on "living American composers, not on whether they're male or female," said its executive director, Claudette Beaulieu.)

On April 30, the New Orchestra, under Paul Dunkel, will offer the American premiere of "The Young Dead Soldiers," a choral work by Ms. Schonthal that was scheduled to have its world premiere in Germany yesterday. On March 12, Mr. Dunkel is to lead the orchestra in the world premiere performance of "The Exiled Heart" by Michelle Ekizian.

Ms. Ekizian, a 30-year old composer from Mamaroneck who has been winning awards and major grants during the last year, does not belong to New York Women Composers. "The term 'woman composer' sets me on edge," she said.

Ms. Ekizian said she feared that "making an issue" of women's music would "in the long term make it more difficult for women writing distinctive and technically mastered music to establish a serious reputation.

Music should stand on its own merits," she added.

Ms. Schonthal agreed that "without quality we are no place." She pointed out, however, that "women have been rejected so much they don't try anymore" to send their work, with its high mailing costs (her own opera cost \$160 to mail), to competitions and concert-presenting committees whose screening procedures may not be fair. (Submissions to competitions are usually not made anonymously, and women have been underrepresented on selection committees, according to these composers.) A group can focus attention on such problems, she suggested.

At 8 P.M. Wednesday the Purchase Music Ensemble, some of whose

members also belong to New York Women Composers, will present a concert at Manhattanville College. Works will include Ms. Bell's "Fantasy Sonata" for piano and cello; Ms. Campbell's "Parallels," for piano and viola; "Requiem" for small orchestra by Ruth Berman Harris, president of Purchase Music Ensemble; "Songs of Iowa Women" by Jane Hart, and "Meteorology," a piano solo by Binnette Lipper.

Music by these composers as well as Ms. Schonthal can be heard elsewhere in the area and in New York City during November and later in the winter. For further information, call the Purchase Music Ensemble at 946-9154 or New York Women Composers at 631-4361. ■

We hate these 'women's concerts.'"
Ms. Schonthal added that, for now
at least, "to get the music to the pub-
lic we have to lobby this way."

Some composers eschew the group,
whose Westchester contingent met
recently in the North Tarrytown
home of Ms. Bell and her husband,
Robert E. Friou, a lawyer and the or-
ganization's administrator. Mr. Friou
defends the organization against
charges of "ghettoization."

"I sense a systemic pattern of dis-
crimination similar to what formerly
existed in the bar," he said. "That dis-
couragement of women is being
eliminated from the law, but in music
there is still very strong exclusion.
We should deal with a problem we