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**Author**

LeBaron, Anne

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# Down the Rabbit-Hole of Innovation

*A thousand things advance; nine hundred and ninety-nine retreat; that is progress.*

—Henri Frédéric Amiel, Swiss poet and philosopher (1821–1881)

BY ANNE LEBARON

At the height of her compositional powers, a livid Ruth Crawford Seeger wrote of encountering discrimination. The tone of her prose echoes composer and musicologist Wilfrid Meller’s depiction of the “angry wit” expressed in her String Quartet. Eighty years ago, the young composer found herself barred from a meeting in which the New York Musicological Society was founded—despite her explicit request to be in attendance, despite the fact that its principal organizer, Charles Seeger, was her teacher (and would soon become her future husband), and despite the fact that

she was lodging in the very home in which the meeting took place (that of music patron Blanche Walton). Although she was permitted to sit in the next room, she was excluded from the sharing of information that, by nature of the subject matter, had a direct bearing on her creative interests. Her reaction to this situation, as entered in her diary on February 22, 1930:

*The musicologists meet. It is decided that I may sit in the next room and hear [Joseph] Yasser talk about his new supra scale. Then when I come out for this purpose, I find someone has closed the doors. Blanche is irate, so am I. “Men are selfish,” says Blanche.*

*“You just have to accept the fact.” Perhaps, I wonder, their selfishness is one reason why they accomplish more than women... I walk past the closed door to my room, and when I pass I turn my head toward the closed door and quietly but forcibly say, “Damn you,” then go on in my room and read Yasser’s article. Later, my chair close to the door, I hear some of the discussion.<sup>1</sup>*

Perhaps the tension exuding from parts of Ruth Crawford’s String Quartet, written the following year, was foreshadowed

1. Matilda Gaume, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: Memoirs, Memories, Music* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1986), 196.

*There is a persistent assumption that women composers have not contributed to innovations in the field of music composition. This assumption results from the absence of a framework that would allow us to conceive, as a society, of women composers as originators, pioneers, and explorers whose contributions are deemed significant for music culture.*

by the taut tone of dismay in her diary entry—the entry itself being performative, documenting her reaction to the refusal of her friends, colleagues, and future husband to allow her participation in this meeting. Her words communicate to future readers her palpable frustration at being treated as less than equal. Exclusionary strategies, whether consciously or unconsciously manifested, continue to undermine the acceptance of transformative contributions from women composers and other women in music.

Musical notation and the art of writing represent systems of communication realized through graphic means. The act of composing music, a form of writing, most often employs a universally accepted language (or more individualistic forms of graphic notation). Both systems preserve and disseminate ways of thinking and creating. That is, they are repositories of and conduits for information. Such repositories are not objective or neutral: they mirror societal ideologies, and are interpreted through the dominant values of those societies.

There is a persistent assumption that women composers have not contributed

to innovations in the field of music composition. This assumption results from the absence of a framework that would allow us to conceive, as a society, of women composers as originators, pioneers, and explorers whose contributions are deemed significant for music culture. This deficiency leads to an unwillingness to consider composition in non-gendered terms, and is therefore a testament to the way in which work is construed on gendered terms. As illustration, I offer the following personal anecdote and a subsequent exploration of the ramifications set in motion by a seemingly innocuous yet ultimately unsettling remark. By providing a description of the contextual environment, this anecdote will be all the more meaningful.

Since 2001, a suburb in the northern edges of Los Angeles County, eponymous with a type of orange and with that orange's namesake, the third largest city in Spain, has been my home. In Valencia, cultural stimulation across disciplines abounds at CalArts, where I teach. Directly south, the vast metropolis of Los Angeles, studded with vibrant pockets of art and music, represents one of the richest

and most dynamic smorgasbords of contemporary arts in the U.S.—despite the paltry funding for musical and other art forms in a city that revolves around filmmaking. As an active composer and academic working within this milieu, I'm increasingly disturbed, and distressed, by the generally unbalanced representation of women composers in large venues, festivals, smaller concert series, and the like. Clearly, we're in full retreat, in the midst of one or more of Amiel's nine hundred and ninety-nine regressions. Progress? In one of the most sociologically and musically experimental states in the union: glacial, if not abysmal.

This combination of circumstances, resulting in what can only be called 'exclusionary programming,' became painfully evident during the 2009–2010 concert season in Los Angeles. The most glaring example: the lack of programming of women composers' works in the ambitious and highly praised Left Coast / West Coast Festival. (The LA Philharmonic was the principal venue, and I don't believe the appearance by Pauline Oliveros in a duo concert, at another venue, sufficiently addresses the

gaping void here.) There are other cases as well. The legendary Monday Evening Concert series, piggybacking on the celebration of Western composers, opened its first concert of 2010 with "Mostly Californian"—and yes, not mostly male, all male. The kick-off sentence on the MEC website for this concert, "California has always attracted innovators," plays right into the theme of my inquiry—or at least, frolics on the margins. In productions mounted by Long Beach Opera, you'll find plenty of women actively performing, but no female opera composers. Likewise, year after year at Jacaranda, a critically acclaimed new music "series of adventures," one finds no women composers to applaud (although I've been informed that this will soon no longer be the case). Yet another example, this time a residency program: the Young American Composer-in-Residence Program—devoid of any young women composers. Several more modest concert series in Southern California are also found wanting in a balanced representation of composers. Why are the individuals affiliated with these organizations—curators / programmers / directors / sponsors / supporters (of both genders)—so seemingly oblivious to dozens

of women composers residing in the state of California or, for that matter, to hundreds living in the US and beyond? Are such oversights simply accidental? The same might be said in reference to the inadequate representation of African American composers on festivals and concert series celebrating contemporary music.

Granted, there are exceptions, far and wide, to this ostrich-like state of affairs. And this brings me to a comment made by the director of a local contemporary music group, an ensemble distinguished by an unusually consistent record of presenting works by women. In a brief conversation, as I complimented him on the track record of his ensemble, he graciously thanked me. Then, in the next breath, he pointed out that "no woman composer had, in fact, ever been an innovator." This assertion left me stunned. Upon reflection—for, like an earworm (a portion of music that becomes stuck in one's head), my friend's declaration firmly planted itself into my consciousness—I believe the message underlying such a proclamation is embedded in a pervasive mindset: although music by women deserves to be heard,

women have yet to “prove themselves” by scaling new heights. What if the real message lurking behind the articulated façade is: “My conditioning doesn’t allow me to imagine that women composers might be capable of originating new styles and techniques.”

I find the validity of an allegation claiming that women composers have not distinguished themselves as innovators (an exclusionary assertion insinuating that women therefore lack the ability to play a significant role in the development of music) to be without merit. Indeed, why does innovation get construed in gendered terms? Before going further, a working definition of innovation, as it relates to the ideas in this essay, is in order. Innovation, derived from “novus” (new) and “novare” (to renew), implies “better,” “cooler,” “hipper”. According to Leonard B. Meyer in *Style And Music: Theory, History, And Ideology*, innovation is “devising new strategies.” I would expand the definition, as it relates to music, to include the “contribution of new stylistic features,” especially features that other composers take note of and incorporate into their own works. Meyer goes on to

make this penetrating observation: “The cultural climate can either encourage or discourage innovation.” Even more astutely, Linda McDowell scrutinizes the far broader implications of the often insidious consequences resulting from everyday remarks and routine conclusions concerning gender: “The significance of uncovering the ways in which commonplace assumptions about gender structure the very nature of thought, of knowledge itself, is huge. It means that rethinking gender divisions requires nothing less than the reconstruction of Western knowledge itself: perhaps an even larger task than overturning of structural inequalities between men and women. But one, of course, depends on the other.”<sup>2</sup>

Complacently engaging in habitual ways of thought, and contentedly taking refuge in the familiar, leads to the unfortunate preservation of a predominant ideology at the expense of other worldviews. Instead, why not routinely question received wisdom, and attentively observe, deconstruct, and re-examine tacit

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2. Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 13.

beliefs? As McDowell suggests, we need to expand our questions from the particular to the overarching. So, do we ultimately have the framework to consider women's stylistic contributions as innovations; to view women themselves as being capable of offering up new musical vocabulary, sonorities, configurations that would push music to new horizons?

Ruth Crawford Seeger's *String Quartet*, sporting a number of experimental techniques, is celebrated as a “stunning masterpiece.”<sup>3</sup> The oft-cited third movement, a “sound mass” composition, was built on the wholly original concept of a structural heterophony of dynamics. By assigning a clearly defined system of rhythmic patterns to crescendos and diminuendos in each instrument, she achieved a seamlessly undulating accumulation of sound, ahead of its time by about thirty years. According to Wilfred Mellers, “Its tensity and angry wit voice protest not merely or mainly against inequable and iniquitous social systems but also against the frustrations inherent in living, especially as a woman in a

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3. Wilfrid Mellers, *Music in a New Found Land* (New York: Oxford University Press), xv.

man-made industrial technocracy.”<sup>4</sup> Her work made an impression on Edgard Varèse, and influenced composers such as György Ligeti, John Cage, James Tenney, and Elliott Carter. In her landmark biography, Judith Tick points out that Gilbert Chase, in the second edition of *America’s Music*, “confidently established Ruth Crawford as an important innovator.”<sup>5</sup> A more recent influential work by a composer who has blazed her way into uncharted territories should be mentioned: Kaija Saariaho’s striking and evocative *Nymphea*. Written for string quartet with live electronic processing, *Nymphea* moves innovation into the realm of psychoacoustically-manipulated textures. With her wildly successful first opera, *L’amour de loin*, where she merges penetrating dramatic insight with uniquely forged methods of handling microtones and an alchemical skill with timbre, she has set a high benchmark for twenty-first century opera.

These are only two examples of many illustrating technical and stylistic

4. Mellers, xv.

5. Judith Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer’s Search for American Music* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press), 355.

innovations by woman composers. Meanwhile, attention must also be directed to the burgeoning current generation of women composers who also perform, often integrating technology into their work. Vaporizing boundaries among art venues, classical music presenters, and clubs, these women have established indelible, unshakable, and unmistakable identities as composer / performers, exquisitely original as soloists but also stunning in their collaborative ventures: Pamela Z, Mari Kimura, Miya Masaoka, Marina Rosenfeld. Their predecessors are luminaries such as Pauline Oliveros, Charlotte Moorman, Yoko Ono, Diamanda Galas, Meredith Monk, Laurie Anderson, Annea Lockwood, the late Marianne Amacher, and the somewhat younger Shelly Hirsch, LaDonna Smith, Laetitia Sonami, and Ikue Mori. In the great majority of cases, the performative, stylistic, and technological breakthroughs of all these women remain underrepresented as innovations, further perpetuating the problematic premise that is the focus of this paper. Such clear evidence of transformative contributions by women leads me to hypothesize that

perhaps the term “innovation” in music is construed in masculine terms, and that women’s work is not given space within the confines of such a gendered construct. If we can become more attuned to the ways in which the definition of innovation (and related offshoots, such as stylistic contributions) gets constructed in the discourse, perhaps we can advance to the place where women are also recognized for their contributions to innovative discoveries in music.

I’m grateful to my friend for his seemingly innocuous and commonplace observation, as it initiated this examination of a widely held, pervasive, even viral belief that deserves to be derailed. Such a revision in our unspoken and unexamined agreement with long-held beliefs may well be underway, albeit gathering steam too slowly to observe with the naked eye. The clarion call has been sounding for decades, and prying apart ossified concepts will help steer us toward that “thousandth thing” that propels us forward into true progress.