Canadian Women Composers
A History of Underrepresentation/ A Compelling Present

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This research examines the work and recognition of Canadian women composers active from roughly the mid-twentieth century to the present by drawing on resources available at Library and Archives Canada. Data from the Canadian Music Centre demonstrate a systematically disproportionate gender gap between male and female Canadian music composers, even as more women musicians undertake post-secondary studies. Using Violet Archer as a case study, we see that the potential of Canadian women composers flourishes when these women are recognised and supported. This study highlights the importance of Canadian women composers’ artistic contribution to Canadian life, especially as educators. An argument is made that more emphasis should be placed on the contribution of women in both the classroom and the concert hall. This research was made possible by the assistance provided by the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program, and the guidance of University of Ottawa Professor of Music, Dr. Roxane Prevost.

"I was so deeply involved in music that I couldn't spend time worrying about not being a man."


The original Hockey Night in Canada theme was written by Dolores Claman in 1968.

Through an examination of concert programmes and sources with biographical information, my research has shown that gender is a key feature in the promotion of female composers. It is surprising that this remains the case given the advancements that women have made in other fields. As recently as 2012, composer Evelyn Stroobach explained that she is “usually the only female composer on the program.” This label can initially be beneficial as a means to create more opportunities, but it quickly becomes detrimental since women composers are set apart from male composers, as if their accomplishments could never equal those of male counterparts.

Another crucial element common to professional women composers is their encouragement and success in education, rather than the more “prestigious” concert hall. As in other professions, young women are often steered away from the male-dominated field of composition into education. Women should be encouraged at a young age to pursue composition studies and be given equal opportunity to succeed as composers, if they choose to do so.

Montreal composer Sonia Paço-Rocchia chats with concert-goers after an Ottawa New Music Creators concert, January 2014.

Taking Action

There are many reasons to be optimistic about advancing equal representation of Canadian women composers in the repertoire.

For example, Dr. Bernard Andrews of the University of Ottawa’s Faculty of Education has requested works equally between genders for his “New Sounds of Learning” project, which commissions works specifically for premiere and continued performance within the Ottawa Catholic School Board.

As well, Ottawa New Music Creators, of which I am currently Vice-President, has recently hosted a concert at All Saints Church that featured two premières by professional Canadian women composers – both of whom co-performed and were present.

Advancement and advocacy by organisations, such as the Association of Canadian Women Composers and the ONMC, and University-led research initiatives, can help to reduce the gap between genders. It is, however, through education that most are introduced to new repertoire. By changing the canon of works studied in class and in performance, the gap between genders could potentially be greatly reduced.

Every educator should remain diligent about introducing works that balance gender, among other things, when choosing repertoire for the classroom.