

Canadian Women Composers

A History of Underrepresentation/ A Compelling Present



Logo, Association of
Canadian Women Composers
(acwc.ca)

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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.



Violet Archer

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

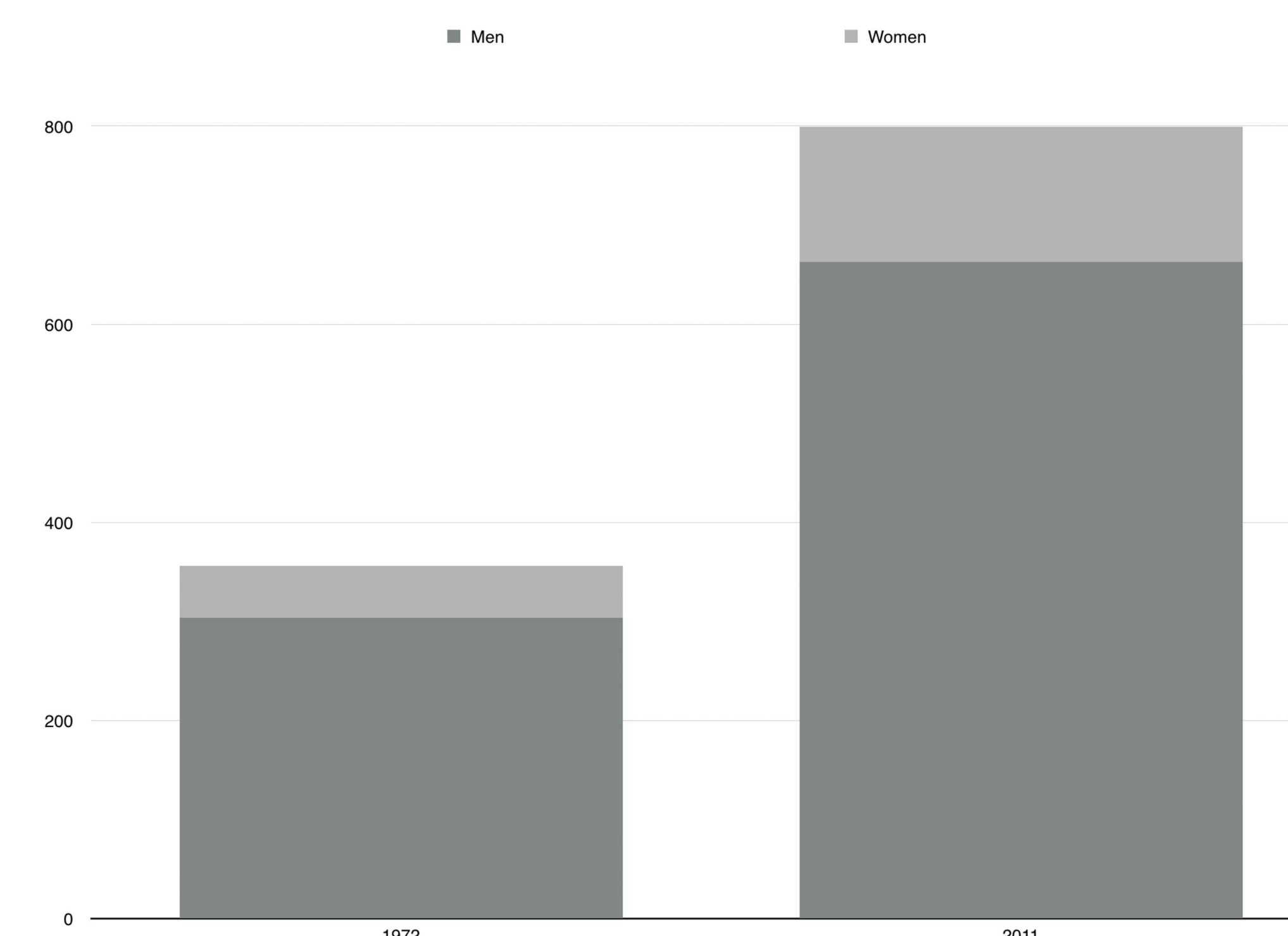
– Violet Archer, *New Trails*, 1998

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

Source: Beckwith, John and Keith MacMillan, Eds. Contemporary Canadian Composers. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1975.

An investigation of multiple compendiums of Canadian composers available at Library and Archives Canada has led to the conclusion that men disproportionately outnumber women in music composition, as can be seen in the graph below.

Gender Distribution of Professional Composers (Canadian Music Centre)



Source: Helmut Kallman, Ed. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Catalogue of Canadian Composers: Revised and Enlarged Edition. Scholarly Press: Michigan, 1972;

Julia Elliott. "The Loneliness of the Female Composer: Work by Ottawa Pianist to be Featured at Chamberfest." The Ottawa Citizen. 6 August 2012. Accessed 13 12 14: <<http://www.ottawacitizen.com/travel/loneliness+female+composer/7045386/story.html>>

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 premieres 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.

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 Strobach 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.



Local music composer Evelyn Strobach beside her piano in her Barrhaven home.

Photograph by: JULIE OLIVER, OTTAWA CITIZEN

Some 15 years ago at university, Evelyn Strobach studied the art of composing for various sections of an orchestra, including strings, brass, woodwinds, piano and harpsichord. A music professor encouraged her to go out and find people to play her compositions. "No one turned me down," she notes. "They were quite enthusiastic."

Today, Strobach can easily find assistants to play her works. "I've heard composers say they live to have their music performed. I don't think there's anything better on the planet than to share music."

And that's what Strobach will do Monday Aug. 6, as part of the Ottawa International Chamber Music Festival. The composer's new work for solo violin was written for the talents of Ottawa violist Balint Tishlakova. The work is to be performed at the National Gallery at noon. This three-movement piece, called Into the Wind, is one of several contemporary compositions on the program called New Music Now 1. Of the five composers in this category, Strobach is the only female composer.

Among Strobach's musical accomplishments, she has written four symphonies which have been performed by 13 orchestras in Canada, Europe and Asia, including the Czech Philharmonic in Prague, the Ukrainian State Symphony Orchestra in Kiev and the Ottawa Symphony Orchestra. Her choral works have been performed by the National Opera Chorus in Kiev and Ottawa's Harmonia Chorus. And then there are commissions for solo guitar or piano and also saxophone and a music book, Medieval Tales: The Art of the Mode, published in 2005 by Ottawian Music Publications.

What are the trials of a female composer in 2012? Loneliness, for one. "I'm usually the only female composer on the program," she says, then laughs. According to the Canadian Music Centre, a national body that promotes the works of its associate composers, in 2011 it counted 788 associate composers, with only 136 women.

"One of the primary reasons that there are fewer female composers active at a professional level in Canada is that many of the prominent musical institutions (orchestras and opera companies) are committed to music of the past," says Matthew Evans, the music centre's Ontario regional director. "Although an explanation for the discrepancy in the number of female composers is far more complex, I have heard from many music teachers that female students don't identify with composition as a profession because the imagined composer is always male."

Evelyn Strobach – Ottawa Citizen, 2012