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Introduction

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Voix de femmes : mélanges offerts à Violet Archer

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INTRODUCTION

Regula Burckhardt Qureshi

This work honouring Violet Archer consists of contributions that highlight the way women have made their voices heard in musical traditions dominated by men. From positions that vary in their degree of subordination, women composers, performers, and scholars of music have made unique and richly diverse contributions to the musical life of their communities and times.

The content of the volume is firmly anchored in Canada, with an introductory chapter on Violet Archer, a unique chronology of her works and their performances, and with a chapter on the remarkable Ida Halpern who pioneered the study of B.C. Native music. But the scope of the volume is deliberately international. Our intent is to highlight the Canadian contribution to the highly topical international debate on “women in music,” situating it among African American women composers, East Indian courtesan singers, and women musicians under the French Bourbon kings, and also within the context of historical and societal constraints on what women could say and play in music. Within this larger setting, the volume profiles Violet Archer as an example of a woman’s total commitment to making the language of classical music her own creative voice and that of her world. A uniquely musical feature of the volume is the celebration of this voice through an original dedicated composition by a renowned American composer who was one of her first students.

How do women gain their voice in music, how do they create it, make it heard, celebrate, own, and share it? Questions of voice are also questions of context: what grooves, what rules, and what audiences do women encounter; what stifles, what supports or restrains them; who silences, who listens, and who responds to their voices? But, above all, voice is identity: whose voice, whose language are we hearing, who is she? We are only beginning to learn, even in the purely informational sense: “life and work” scholarship on women in music remains rudimentary.

Complicating the quest is the challenge of working both within, and against, a consciousness created by a scholarly tradition that has drawn its canon and priorities from Western cultural patriarchy. This challenge implicates authors as much as their subjects. The goal here is to address women in music as autonomous subjects, not mere objects of study, while also positioning them within the contexts and relationships of their marginality. An appropriate women-centered scholarship needs to attend to the issues of voice, authority, and representation, even as it strives to be relational and contextual. Voice here carries dialogue and difference; dialogue between author and subject, difference in who says what and how. The implication is a respect for the particular, the individual, the local, and a willingness to bypass classical norms as standards,

exploring instead their creative use in the web of meaningful connections that sustain individual women musicians and serve them as conduits into wider spheres.

This book has been motivated by a search for such perspectives in order to celebrate a remarkable individual among women musicians who has spent a long and productive life creating, honing, and sounding her voice as Canada's foremost woman composer. Grounded in the personal experience of students and colleagues and in the life of the music department that she shaped through many years of composing and teaching at the University of Alberta; grounded also in the abundant performances of her music, and in her highly professional persona of acclaimed national composer, the project reflects personal association and commitment among the authors, most of whom are former students and colleagues.¹ Equally important, it reflects a strong commitment to women-centered work² that binds the personal to the wider constituency of women in music, a world with which Violet Archer, too, has increasingly identified in recent years.

Violet Archer's life leads her from the humble beginnings of an Italian immigrant child in Montréal to a tenacious struggle to study with Bartók and with Hindemith at Yale University, culminating in a university career that took her from Texas and Oklahoma to the University of Alberta where she gradually built a national reputation and went on to become an internationally known symbol for the advancement of women in the field of composition. A tenaciously hard worker who lives composition, Violet Archer has built a large corpus of works that continues to grow.³ She is also a highly esteemed and indomitable teacher of composition; composer Larry Austin's words and music in this volume speak eloquently of her early creative mentorship, and today she still teaches children composition. On another front, she has dedicated herself to educating performers through compositions at all levels of musical competence. But her commitment to imparting music has always extended beyond her own works to sharing her reverence and understanding of the great compositions of the past.

Archer has been recognized regionally, nationally, and internationally, but the core of her reputation, as well as her compositional identity, is Canadian. Her compositional language and craft are firmly rooted in the idiom of Hindemith, but, like Bartók, she shows her commitment to her country, often incorporating in her music the voices of Canada's diverse communities, drawing especially from Native and Inuit music. In turn, Canadian musical institutions

¹ Austin, La France, Qureshi, and Whittle have been Archer's students, Dalen and Steblin her colleagues.

² Koskoff has pioneered the cross-study of women in music; she edited *Cross-Cultural Perspectives in Music and Gender* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1987).

³ According to her own count, she has composed over 300 works, which have been performed in Canada, the United States, Britain, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Italy, Israel, Czechoslovakia, Russia, Japan, New Zealand, Chile, Ireland, Australia, Spain, Germany, Finland, Austria, Thailand, Hong Kong, China, Portugal, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Ukraine. See also Linda Hartig, *Violet Archer: A Bio-Bibliography*, *Bio-Bibliographies in Music*, no. 41 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991).

commission, perform, and enshrine her music. Now in her eighties, Miss Archer (as students and juniors always address her), continues to compose assiduously, rounding out her compositional repertoire while participating in its performances across the world.

In the book's two cornerstone contributions, Brenda Dalen and James Whittle have chosen to profile the early development of her person and her works, by presenting "the composer's voice"⁴ in a unique polyphony of speech and music, life and works. Together, the two chapters delineate and document the crucial formative period in her compositional and personal life in a composite vision of their creative interplay. In particular, they highlight one woman's determined struggle to find her voice as a composer and thus to pioneer a female presence in the (male) ranks of those who are accorded the power to speak on behalf of the musical community of their country.

Further anchoring the book in Canada, but in a very different musical context, is Kenneth Chen's telling chapter on Ida Halpern, a contemporary of Violet Archer. One of Canada's first female music scholars, she pioneered the study of North West Coast Native music but found little recognition or acceptance in the academic musical establishment. Her story sheds a different light on women's access to the world of music: perhaps scholarly authority over music was even less attainable than authority as a composer. It also raises questions of local and individual differences within regionally and ethnically diverse and dispersed musical communities.

For musical life is always local and particular, whether located in Western Canada, Northern India, Paris, America, or the world. And it uniquely arises from individual agency, no matter how mediated or circumscribed. This is eloquently articulated in the other chapters on individual women: Florence Price and Margaret Bonds by Penelope Peters, and Begum Akhtar by Regula Qureshi. It is also richly displayed in the significant and diverse historical and geographical instances of women's music making: in Albert La France's chapter on women musicians under the Bourbon kings, and in the two chapters by Ellen Koskoff and Rita Steblin that focus on women playing musical instruments.

But musical life can also display a remarkable sameness of contexts, ideologies, and power structures within and against which women have been raising their voices. Koskoff's chapter makes this abundantly clear, and other chapters confirm it. Marginalized in certain predictable ways within these structures women's voices have often remained inaudible, being confined to audiences that are themselves marginalized. Furthermore, there are biological and social constraints beyond gender, which further confound the female predicament. Race, ethnic and cultural identity, class and economic status all stand out as powerful in different musical and social contexts, blurring and problematizing the gender issue and endowing women's voices with a complexity that demands respectfully individual consideration. The women music makers in this volume are also women of colour (Peters), of humble class origin (Dalen), of ethnic

⁴Edward T. Cone's thoughtful work and its evocative title remains a seminal interpretive piece: *The Composer's Voice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974).

minorities (Chen, Dalen), of stigmatized social origin (Qureshi). At the same time, most of them are also privileged in some way by class, wealth, and education—also an index of sameness.

Finally, in the face of all constraints, there is musical talent and accomplishment—some call it “genius,” a term that serves mainly to acknowledge an individual’s sometimes uncanny capacity to coalesce and transcend established limitations, even boundaries of identity.

Given its commitment to acknowledging commonalities as well as individual diversity in exploring the voices of women, this book itself inevitably speaks in many voices—literally, the interview, the composition, the survey, the poetic metaphor, the song, the image. At the same time, it is a highly collaborative effort. Initiated by composer Alfred Fisher, the initial conception and editing was undertaken by our late colleague, Christopher Lewis, whose spirit is very much alive in these pages. The timely expertise of Brenda Dalen and Albert La France is gratefully acknowledged, as is the support of Mary Cyr (former English editor of the *Canadian University Music Review*), the excellent production editing by Marc-André Roberge (French editor of the *Review*), and the careful proof reading by Melinda Cooke.

In the end, this book would not have seen the light of day without the essential financial support of three major Canadian institutions whose commitment to music scholarship and music in Canada is outstanding: the University of Alberta (Vice President (Research), Faculté Saint-Jean and the Faculty of Arts), the SOCAN Foundation, and the Canadian University Music Society. The volume itself is our best expression of gratitude for their generosity.