

AULI IRJALA

A MINORITY IN MUSIC
WOMEN AS PROFESSIONAL COMPOSERS AND MUSICIANS

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PREFACE

In sociological research of artists, demographic variables such as age and gender are of great significance. As far as composers and musicians are concerned, gender is an interesting variable insofar that the breakdown is askew: women account for considerably smaller share than men. Composers and musicians differ from other artists in this respect. In Finland men and women are evenly distributed among scenic artists, and two-fifths of visual artists as well as authors are women. In the field of dance the situation is reversed: women represent the majority. This article investigates the reasons behind the small number of women in the field of music, in particular among composers and rock musicians. The article is a part of the ongoing research concerning the economic position of composers and musicians in Finland. The paper was prepared for the European Symposium on the Status of the Artist held in Hanasaari, Finland 30 May - 2 June, 1992.

FEMALE COMPOSER - A RARITY

Music and, in particular, composing is male-dominated in western culture. In classical music the role of a woman has been that of a performer; composing has belonged to men. Women's musical activity, whether this involves the type of music, an instrument or performance, is characterized by amateurism and lack of esteem¹.

In a history of Finnish composers, edited by Sulho Ranta in 1945², two female composers are presented among the nearly hundred males: Ida Moberg (b. 1859) and Helvi Leiviskä (b. 1902). That women are absent from Finnish musical history does not mean that they have not worked in the field of music. At least nine Finnish female composers of classical music have made a name for themselves during the past hundred years. In addition to the two mentioned above, they are: Greta Dahlström (b. 1887), Heidi Sunblad-Halme (b. 1903), Maili Wright-Välisalo (b. 1908), Maija Korkeakoski (b. 1909), Greta Rantanen (b. 1914), Anneli Arho (b. 1951) and Kaija Saariaho (b.

¹Koskoff, Ellen 1987: 15.

²Ranta, Sulho 1945.

1952). However, there are four empty decades between Rantanen, born in the 1910s and contemporary composers. Anneli Arho and Kaija Saariaho are the only women mentioned in reference books concerning contemporary composers³, but at least the composers Carita Holmström (b. 1954) and Marjatta Meritähhti (b. 1943) could be also mentioned.

Women's involvement in the field of music has attracted little attention not only in history, but also in other research. According to Bowers and Tick, the research tradition of the history and sociology of western music concentrates on areas where women's contribution does not come to the fore. The economic position of composers and musicians, the breakdown of their professions or educational opportunities have not been chosen as objects for research. Instead emphasis has been placed on documents where women's music is missing or on highly-talented individuals who are men.⁴ Research and history writing are made from men's point of view.

When works by female composers are criticized, attention is often drawn to "feminine" and "masculine" features. At least older critiques consider the absence of feminine features positive. In 1905 Oscar Merikanto wrote a critique on a concert of Ida Moberg's compositions. In it he praised the composer's diligence in studies, her high goal to be the first woman who had composed a symphony. However, he continued that the work "does not show any particular originality by the composer, nor does the symphony contain any especially deep thoughts, but formally it is well done and contains healthy music without any tendency towards sentimentality and tacky syrup so common with women. A spirited woman talks in it - but nevertheless a woman". A critique on Helvi Leiviskä's piano concerto states that "there was no trace of feminine sentimentality nor any miniature-likeness that can be easily associated with female composers. On the contrary: the work was quite a man's talk from beginning to end."⁵

A creative artist has often been associated with a genius. The thought can be traced back to Plato and its heyday was during Romanticism. Alongside with other characteristics, masculinity is generally associated with genius; hence a creative artist cannot be a woman. Or should a woman be exceptionally talented, she is considered an

³Korhonen, Kimmo 1990. Hako, Pekka & Nieminen, Risto 1981.

⁴Bowers, Jane & Tick, Judith 1986: 3.

⁵Ranta, Sulho 1945: 230, 636.

asexual being, not a woman⁶.

WOMAN AS A ROCK ARTIST

Rock music has been - and to a certain extent still is - an even more male area than classical music. Both playing and composing belong to men, with women relegated mainly to singing. The general attributes of rock music are masculinity, sexuality and the degeneration of youth⁷. In the Finland of the 1950s, boys had an almost exclusive right to play rock'n'roll and some girls, albeit few, performed as vocalists. On the whole, there were few vocalists in the rock bands of that time. In the 1960s, the trend leaned towards folk music, which brought the vocalists - also women, to the fore (e.g. Päivi Paunu and Anki). The woman of the 1970s could sing rock'n'roll, she could be "a wild rock gal" (e.g. Muska and Virve Rosti). The 1970s witnessed the advent of the first female touring band (Schoolgirls), but it was only in the 1980s that more female bands appeared. An all-girl band was even something as such, for example the "makebelieve" Belaboris, where girls served only as a decoration set but music was made by men. "Genuine" and even well-known all-girl bands existed in the early 1980s (e.g. Top Candy, Musta Maija, Tavaramarkkinat, Geisha and PIM). The 1980s have witnessed women performing as soloists and players, some with instruments traditionally considered to belong to men, such as bass players Eeva Koivusalo (SE-band) and Aija Puurtinen (Honey B.& T-Bones).⁸

The punk wave of the early 1980s, alongside with feminism, has been regarded as the most important reason for an increase of female rock musicians. Also in Finland punk brought out women (e.g. Heinäsirkka) to the sphere of rock music. According to a study conducted by Lähteenmaa, never before have girls and women playing rock music been more visible in the Finnish rock world than in the 1980s.⁹

⁶Koskoff, Ellen 1987: 15.

⁷Lähteenmaa, Jaana 1989(a): 24.

⁸Lähteenmaa, Jaana 1989(b): 88-89.

⁹idem, p. 89, 108.

FROM HOBBY TO PROFESSION - A COMPOSER OUT OF A GIRL STRUMMING THE PIANO?

The most popular hobby of the 15-24-year-olds is playing music, and boys and girls engage in it in equal numbers. By contrast, girls sing more than boys.¹⁰ However, of the girls included in Lähteenmaa's research group (about 12-15-year-olds) twice as many girls than boys reported that their hobby was playing an instrument - yet, the number for boys playing in rock bands was tenfold as compared to that for girls.¹¹

Much has been said about music schools becoming dominated by girls, and that indeed appears to be the ongoing trend. In the term 1983-84, 67 per cent of pupils in music play schools, music schools and conservatoires were girls, and their number had risen to over 70 per cent in 1989-90. By contrast, the number of girls declined somewhat at the conservatoire level; there were a total of 971 students in the 11 music conservatoires in Finland, of them slightly more than half were girls. At least where girls are concerned, having music as a hobby leads them to start musical studies, but more girls than boys drop out on the way. In the school term 1976-77, 65 per cent of those who had passed the basic course in conservatoires were girls, but they accounted for 34 per cent of those who had passed the professional course.¹²

Girls are a minority in the Oulunkylä Pop and Jazz Music Conservatoire, but the difference has narrowed in the course of the 1980s.

Term	applicants of whom girls	admitted of whom girls
1984-85	38%	27%
1989-90	42%	36%

Teaching in music schools does not include own creation, improvisation nor composition training. The numerous girls in music schools learn to interpret, but are not taught to have confidence in their own ability to create something new.¹³ Thus girls turn out to be piano strummers but not composers. If working in a disciplinary manner

¹⁰Liikkanen, Mirja 1984: 78.

¹¹Lähteenmaa, Jaana 1989(b): 97. 42% of the girls (n=226), 24% of the boys (n=217).

¹²The Association of Finnish Music Schools.

¹³Urho, Ellen 1991.

and listening to authorities is typical female feature, so then the present teaching system of music schools is appropriate for girls in particular. Perhaps girls prefer learning to just interpret in a conciliatory manner.

In the early 1980s, more men than women were studying at the Sibelius Academy. However, since term 1984-85 women have been in the majority, and the difference has been growing all the time¹⁴. However, it is mostly men who study composition, music theory and conducting. From one to three women have been studying music theory between 1985 and 1989; not a single one studied composition. Of the 23 professors at the Sibelius Academy, three were women in 1989-90.¹⁵

BIOLOGICAL OR CULTURAL REASONS?

What happens on the way? What happens to talented girls studying music? Why don't women compose? Why don't girls set up rock groups? Several explanations have indeed been given, but have we found a valid answer?

In the seminar "Women and Music" arranged in October 1991 by the Training Centre of the Sibelius Academy, several obstacles to a musical career for women were listed: low self-esteem, high self-criticism, sense of responsibility, common sense and systematic planning of one's life (achieve a proper profession, graduate, care for children...). Jaana Lähteenmaa had noted in her study that girls do not stake everything on one card, they do not solely concentrate on one single matter, but are more versatile. "When a boy has learnt three chords, he quits school and decides to become a rock star, whereas a girl, even if she knows how to play, will belittle her skills and consider it important to graduate", summarized Lähteenmaa.

In their recent book *BrainSex*¹⁶ Anne Moir and David Jessel claim that the ultimate answer to this question has finally been found, and it is simpler than we ever thought: men's and women's brains are structurally different. It is not possible for the female brain to construct extensive abstract thought patterns, therefore women cannot be

¹⁴57% of the students were women in school term 1988-89.

¹⁵Sibelius Academy 1981-90.

¹⁶Moir, Anne & Jessel, David 1991.

geniuses, mathematicians or composers. But different views have also been voiced. According to Shepherd, men compensate for their meagre contribution to biological reproduction with cultural reproduction¹⁷. According to this anti-Freudian interpretation, some sort of "womb-envy" turns men into creative artists in particular. Although these two views conflict with their points of origin, they are however linked by the concept of understanding sex (gender) as something biological. One can also speak of cultural gender. The gender categories man/woman of western society are bound by dualities such as home/public life, nature/culture, soft/hard, and even if these would not function on an individual level - since they are not biological - they are still valid within society and form gender identity¹⁸. In western music tradition composing and female gender identity do not belong together.

According to Lähteenmaa, gender identity is one of the obstacles to girls being involved in rock music, too. She gives three reasons altogether: 1. practical reasons (difficulty in finding girls to play with), 2. conflict in the discourses of feminine and rock music (motherhood is not in harmony with fierce and sexual rock) and 3. cultural conventions (traditionally a woman sings).¹⁹

The two Finnish female composers, Anneli Arho and Kaija Saariaho, explain the scarcity of women among composers from a different perspective. Arho emphasizes the biological difference between man and woman; the abilities required from a composer are more rare to women than to men²⁰. Kaija Saariaho in turn points out social reasons; history has been the history of men, and little attention has been focused on the training of women, because giving birth and caring for children has been considered their primary task²¹.

Whether the fundamental reasons are biological or not, they have an enormous impact as cultural conventions. Tradition is a burden both in classical and rock music. Music culture adheres very strictly to its own norms, and although equality has increased, the norms of western music exclude women from certain areas. According to Lähteenmaa's

¹⁷Shepherd, John 1987: 154.

¹⁸Koskoff, Ellen 1987: 7.

¹⁹Lähteenmaa, Jaana 1989(b): 117.

²⁰Arho, Anneli 1992.

²¹Karjula, Marja-Leena 1992.

study, as late as the mid-eighties, girls playing rock instruments have been faced with the threat of harassment - at least in their thoughts²². When a young girl starts studying composition or chooses rock or jazz to convey her musical expression, an enormous amount of courage is demanded from her, since no model exists for her to follow. Extraordinary creativity and determination is required from the person - also from a boy - endeavouring to become a composer. Demands and prejudices encountered can appear overwhelming for girls. According to studies made on vocational selection, a choice of a profession "alien to one's own gender" (share of one's own gender is 0-10%), is influenced by the family's social status, the values the parents associate with work and as far as girls are concerned, the vitality, originality, expansion and social domination of their ego image²³. The understanding and support provided by family and friends as well as high self-esteem would appear to be necessary for a girl intending to become a composer.

A practical reason is that a large part of a woman's time, in a certain phase of life, is taken up by caring for the home and family with little energy left for pursuing one's own career. This also applies to folk music: previously girls used to sing and make up their own songs but this ended when they got married until the time came to perform keens. On the whole, singing was a woman's form of expression since it did not tie up her hands and restrict her working.²⁴

In all probability the hedonistic-narcistic aspects are not as important to girls as they are to boys. Women express themselves without an audience. According to Lähteenmaa, for example, 80 per cent of girls but only 15 per cent of boys sing when they are alone. Here we approach the problems of defining the professional composer and musician. A professional in music is defined in relation to publicity: a person who plays alone or composes music for himself/herself is not an artist; although the so-called self-definition is known, and it serves as a basis e.g. for the Unesco Recommendation Concerning the Status of the Artist²⁵. On the other hand, it is clear that every artist profession requires a certain degree of publicity thus ensuring a living.

²²Lähteenmaa, Jaana 1989(b): 117.

²³Nummenmaa, Anna Raija 1990.

²⁴Kaasinen, Sari 1991.

²⁵Unesco 1980.

WOMEN'S SHARE OF COMPOSERS AND MUSICIANS ACCORDING TO DIFFERENT DEFINITIONS ²⁶

The number of women among composers and musicians can be examined according to census data and according membership figures in professional organizations. According to census data, the share of women in the professional field has grown in 15 years, from 1970 to 1985, from one-tenth to one-third, which corresponds to the average share of women among all artists in Finland²⁷. Calculated according to membership in professional organizations, the percentage does not reach the level expressed by census data. The explanation may be that women do not belong to professional organizations, whose membership is selected; artists who already have reached a certain professional status. The number of female artists in different musical organizations also varies greatly. The smallest number is found in composer organizations and, in organizations of rock and jazz music. By contrast, half of the members in the Associations of Finnish Soloists and Opera Singers are women.²⁸ Of musicians belonging to the Freelance Employees' Pension Act (TaEL) i.e. having been employed for less than one year, 18 per cent were women in 1990²⁹.

In studies on composers and musicians conducted both in the 1970s and 1980s, women's share has remained equal. In Kristiina Hautala's study³⁰ focusing on the year 1973, women accounted for 22 per cent, as they did in the study³¹ on Helsinki-based composers and musicians carried out in 1985. The ongoing research on composers and musicians (year of research 1989) reveals that women accounted for 21 per cent of the sample. In all three studies the material was based on membership in professional organizations.

²⁶On the definition of an artist and the number of artists see: Mitchell, Ritva & Karttunen, Sari 1991. Irjala, Auli 1991(a).

²⁷Liikkanen, Mirja 1988: 21-22. (In 1970 12% of professionals in the field of music were women, in 1985 30%.)

²⁸Women's share in some musical organizations in 1989: Finnish National Opera Choir and Actors' Union's Opera Singers (together) 51%, Conductors 0%, Musicians' Association 25%, Rock Musicians 55%, Solo 37%, Jazz Federation 3%, Soloists' Association 47%, Finnish Composers 1%, Light Music Composers and Authors ELVIS 9%, Popular Musicians 12%.

²⁹Työeläkejärjestelmän tilastollinen vuosikirja 1986: 18.

³⁰Hautala, Kristiina 1977: 85.

³¹Keskinen, Vesa & Penttinen, Kirsti 1986: 18.

THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN THE FIELD OF MUSIC FROM THE STATE ARTIST POLICY POINT OF VIEW

Male domination in music is apparent also in grant distributing: of the research population 13 per cent - of women 6 per cent and of men 15 per cent - had received a state artist grant in the 1980s. ten per cent of all grant receivers were women, which is relatively less than the whole share of women (20 per cent) in the research sample. Women's grants were also smaller than grants distributed to men. When calculated in years, the biggest amount of grants received among women was 8 years, thus that of men was 21 years (1 year = 66.076 FIM taxfree income in one year). The largest amount (46%) of all the grants (allowed by state, municipalities and private foundations) awarded to women comprised less than 10.000 FIM in 1989. No grants in excess of 70.000 FIM were awarded to women; by contrast 10 per cent of those received by men exceed this sum. On the average women's project grants were smaller than those of men's.

Although women have received grants, they are minority in catalogues listing state prizes, appointments of guiding regional artists or artist-professorships. In the 1980s only one woman (Ellen Urho) has received a state prize. Of the more than 20 guiding regional artists in the field of music, not a single one has been a woman. The same applies to the four artist-professors. All the recipients of the 15-year artist grants have been men. Women's modest concept of themselves (or the critical view of the allotment of grants) is reflected by the scarcity of them in applying for long-term grants; there have been two women among the 110 applicants in the course of 10 years.³²

Female representation in the National Council for Music membership has been marginal. In the councils working between 1968 and 1991 there has been a total of 10 women and 5 of them were elected for the 1989 council. During the same period only 9% of the candidates were women.³³ The present 11-strong National Council for Music has three female members.

³²Irjala, Auli 1991(b): 25.

³³Oesch, Pekka 1990: 33.

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