

The f word: why do we tend to avoid music by women?

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'There's a lot of fabulous music by women; it's flushed with a unique fusion of ideas and colour' – Diana Ambache

No, not a swear word – just females and their musical fabrications: are they really a flop compared to those by men? We're familiar with the idea of fairness in 2013, but still a long way from equality; the statistics don't need quoting again to confirm how far off we are. Even long ago, it seems we were unwelcome: the Bible (Ecclesiastes) said 'All the daughters of music shall be bought low'.

Do people think that this music is feeble, flawed, footling, faded, false, fudged, fusty, fluffy, fuchsia-tinted? Instead of thinking that it's a bit futile to fight the feminist fray, I thought I would try to voice a collection of reasons which might be behind the imbalance.

It's a complicated stew, which possibly includes the idea that you can't play music that you don't know about. Unfamiliarity and ignorance are also related to wishing not to look foolish, by perhaps featuring bad music. The history books are not great

on mentioning this music; broadcasters seem fearful of including it. The world is noticeably fixated with the famous and fashionable; this cult of celebrity leads to programming the hundred favourite tunes you know and love, to reassure people they will enjoy themselves.

Probably fraternity has something to do with it too: if you keep to the boys' club, you know where you are. Funding comes into everything: why would you programme something that might fail and lose you money? Last on this list, I've even heard people suggest that women don't have sufficient mental faculties to be composers (a striking contrast to the current ideas about multi-tasking).

Feature writers have sometimes liked the independent 'stories' of these women, particularly if fascinating titillation or mocking can be included; Ethel Smyth has been somewhat ridiculed as a suffragette serving time in Holloway Prison, conducting her *March of the Women*, with a toothbrush. But it's not much about the music, and in a way such extreme events tend to emphasise how weird women's music might be.

When I'm called a feminist, I tend to reply that I wish for equality, I wish to change this favouritism, so we all have the same chance and opportunity. To this end, I've recently set up a trust, working to raise the profile of female music: it's a small effort towards a better balance, lighting people's fires; can we fascinate the world with possibilities, ferment your fancy?

The thinking that these women are freakish flusters me. There's a lot of fabulous music by women; it's flushed with a unique fusion of ideas and colour. For example, I have a soft spot for the full-blooded music of Amy Beach. Even when composing furtively (such as by using a male name: some of Fanny Mendelssohn's music was published under Felix's name)

it has frequently been done with fervour. As well as a few fripperies, there are many pieces in larger forms, including symphonies by Marianna Martines (1770), Louise Farrenc (1847), Grażyna Bacewicz (1945-53), Florence Price (1931-40), Elizabeth Maconchy (various), and many others. Why is it surprising that women have written operas and big choral works too?

Of course, women have worked towards equality before now; in the 19th century Louise Farrenc was the first woman professor at the Paris Conservatoire to draw attention to the fact that she was paid less than her male colleagues.

While I'm being a fruitcake about the letter f, here are some more: there are fine Fantasies by Maria Theresia von Paradis; I'm especially fond of Amy Beach's piano quintet in F sharp minor (1907); Elena Firsova has written in many forms; and in case this is all a bit earnest, I must mention Madeleine Dring, who had a delightful sense of humour, seen in many works, such as her *Festival Scherzo* (1951).

Is the musical world full now? Have females furthered the world of music? Would it be foolhardy or fun to explore this music? My life has been much enriched by discovering 'new' (frequently old) music by women.

Here are my last f-words: please forgive the *forte* of my final comment: frack off prejudice – may the female force be with you – perhaps you might go and do some exploratory drilling in this fertile field.

The Ambache Charitable Trust raises the profile of music by women, by funding people who promote this music to the widest possible circle

www.ambachecharitabletrust.org
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