

## *What Does it Take for Women to Sing Together?*

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4/11/02

Presentation to the Williams School, New London, Connecticut

I last addressed an audience of Williams students and faculty at my graduation in 1964.

Back then, when the earth's crust was still cooling, and the dinosaurs roamed free, all the students were girls and almost all the faculty were women. We wore skirts to school every day.

We even wore skirts to gym.

We played half-court basketball, skidding to a halt at the center line--those were the rules of the game then. I suppose if we had run up and down the whole length of the gym we might have injured our delicate female tissues. The worst substance abuse problem I ever heard about was smoking cigarettes--tobacco ones--in the parking lot during a school dance. There was one black student, two Asian students. Our academic instruction was narrowly focused, but superb.

The school choir **was** a girls' choir---sopranos and altos only, not tenors or basses. It was pre-civil rights, pre-birth control pill, pre-Vietnam, pre-second wave feminism, pre-Watergate, pre-gay rights, and pre-AIDS--the last days of a civilization now as extinct as that of the Egyptian pharaohs.

Twenty-seven years after I hung up my blue Williams choir robe for the last time, I found myself in an all-female choir once again. It was in California, in 1991, when I joined the Peninsula Women's Chorus for one season. I had worked and made music with men on an equal basis for years, and was completely unprepared for what I found there: a lovely sound of adult sopranos and altos only, musically satisfying and complete. A full repertoire of new classical music I had never heard of, composed just for women's choirs. Fifty-nine new friends. And a society governed by women, where the conductor was a woman, the treasurer was a woman, women moved the choral risers, and everyone seemed to take all that for granted.

I couldn't tell whether I had dug up a time capsule from my days at Williams, or whether I had stumbled onto a whole new phenomenon. One thing was the same, though. All the composers were men.

We knew then what a composer looks like, and so do you: before 1800, a composer was a German guy in a powdered wig. After 1800, a composer was a German guy with bad hair. The ability to compose was apparently attached to the Y chromosome, and that was that.

But singing with the Peninsula Women's Chorus for that one season turned me into an anthropologist. We were so female, so feminist, and yet: to whose music did we give voice? Did women ever compose for women's voices? I decided to find out.

Within two years I had a database of over a thousand pieces composed between 1890 and 1970. That's 1,000 pieces by women for women. Many of these pieces were so well-crafted, so intelligent, and so moving that I wanted to conduct them right away.

These pieces were, almost without exception, out of print and long forgotten. Many of them were dedicated to choirs I had never heard of. It wasn't just the composers who had been lost. It was the choirs, too.

So I founded a community-based women's chorus in 1993, Women's Voices Chorus, and from the beginning half our repertoire has been by women composers. Discovering our musical roots has been a source of tremendous empowerment and joy. As I have immersed myself in this music I have learned about what it takes for musicians in the western European art tradition to make choral music together, and to compose it.

I think it takes four things:

We have be able to get together with other musicians. We have to get training. We need lots of time. And we need social support.

Women musicians have not had widespread and continuous access to all of these necessities. What amazes me is that in the times and places all four factors have been present, women have popped right up and made wonderful music.

1. Getting together with other musicians. It's hard to make sophisticated music out on a farm. If you think about the "Little House" books by Laura Ingalls Wilder, you will recall that Pa played fiddle tunes, and the family sang songs together in the evening, and that was about it. If Laura had wanted to sing in a choir or become a composer, or even have a garage band, she would have been out of luck. (But I wish Pa had taught her to play that violin.)

Women have been able to make music in groups when they lived or worked together in convents, orphanages, women's colleges, and places like the Williams School. This rough sketch is the only pictorial evidence we have of the active musical life of a convent in 17th century Milan, Italy, where the nuns performed sophisticated choral music with instrumental accompaniment. One of them, Chiara Margarita Cozzolani, composed sacred music which was published during her lifetime, and so was performed by musicians outside her convent as well.

In nineteenth-century Europe, with the rise of the educated middle class women who lived in cities, even if they lived separately in family homes, could get to rehearsals easily. This is precisely the era that gave rise to the amateur choral societies, for all voicings, including the women's choir Brahms conducted in Hamburg. Right now, my own chorus owes a lot to the internal combustion engine, since my singers come from up to 30 miles away.

2. Training. I'm sure many of you have spent time alone with a guitar and a chord chart, and you can teach yourself a lot. But your garage band won't get very far if you can't learn from other bands and individual musicians. In the days before recordings and radio, you got every bit of that training face to face.

Laura Ingalls did have one opportunity to sing with a trained musician, and that was when Almanzo Wilder courted her by taking her to a series of evenings at a singing school in “These Happy Golden Years”. I love the account of how the young people learned their “do-re-mi’s” from the traveling singing master, and how they sang rounds. But face it, eight nights in a schoolhouse, especially when you have to leave early because the horse is frisky, is no substitute for years of regular participation in a serious choir. Historically, composers of choral music, like Palestrina, Bach, and Purcell, have learned through apprenticeship in church or cathedral choirs, with daily rehearsal, performance, and instruction in music theory and instrumental study.

There’s been a problem with that for women. The church and cathedral choirs in Palestrina’s Catholic Rome, Bach’s Lutheran Leipzig, and Purcell’s Anglican London were for boys and men only. Period. No girls allowed. If Palestrina, Bach, and Purcell had had equally talented sisters, those girls could not have had the training which made their brothers great.

A very few places provided that kind of environment for women. One was 18th-century Venice, where four girls’ orphanages called the *ospedali* had evolved into residential conservatories. Their music masters were people like Antonio Vivaldi and other choirmasters at St. Mark’s cathedral. They performed public concerts to raise money for their orphanages and for their own dowries. They were a must-see for tourists to Venice, and they wowed travel writers like Charles Burney.

For American women, the flowering of women’s schools and colleges in the 1890’s provided the first setting in which young women could sing in women’s choruses, and find training in music theory and composition.

### 3. Time.

How do you get to Carnegie Hall from here? Practice! Rehearsals take a lot of time.

Nowadays, at the choral conventions I attend, the most amazing performances come from arts magnet high school choirs with daily practice and theory lessons, and from community organizations like the Seattle Girls’ Choir, which is an after-school conservatory program. Again, for American women, this kind of rehearsal time first became available with the rise of girls’ schools and women’s colleges.

Among adult amateurs, time for musical accomplishments has come from leisure. Singers have banded together to hire professional conductors, and have rehearsed weekly--or even more often than that--to perform at high levels.

In the United States, a high point of leisure music was the heyday of the American women’s club, from about 1900 to 1960. As the first large waves of women college and university students graduated, many of them found themselves constrained by social expectations to stay out of the workplace--condemned to leisure. They filled this leisure with women’s club activities of astonishing variety and depth, including hundreds of musical clubs with choruses which rehearsed on weekday mornings.

In Greensboro, North Carolina, the Euterpe Club held lecture and recital series for their membership, and the club chorus gave two big sold-out evening concerts a year. They created the demand for opera in North Carolina, and then financed it, and then made it happen. In Philadelphia, five women's club choruses sponsored a competition for new compositions for women's chorus. Many choruses commissioned pieces by women composers. Composers were able to hear women's choirs often enough to understand how best to write for them. My choir loves music from this era, because it really suits the adult women's choral sound.

This next excerpt is from Frances McCollin's original setting of Christina Rossetti's "In the bleak midwinter." My chorus performs.

#### 4. Social support.

It's hard to sing while you're fighting your way uphill. The little worlds of historic music-making I have told you about thrived because there was a tear in the social fabric which has discouraged women's accomplishment outside the home. Those nuns in Milan stopped singing with instruments, then finally sang only Gregorian chant, when counter-reformation strictures upon musical practice were passed and enforced upon the convents. Those Venetian orphans were able to sing publicly only because Venice was not subject to the Roman prohibition of women singing in church; their programs folded when economic support for the orphanages fell away.

Sometimes we ourselves have ripped up the social supports for our own culture. Women's college choirs stopped singing as women's choirs when these colleges admitted men, and their choral libraries put into dumpsters. Women's musical clubs died out around 1970, when feminism meant going for all the goodies men had on the men's own turf, and large numbers of women entered previous male bastions of the work force.

Everything women need in order to be able to sing together, they need doubly if they are going to compose. Because girls couldn't get training in cathedral choirs, the story of how each woman composer has gotten training, her time, and social support is unique to her. There is no one way to be a woman composer. Many of their stories involve struggles to get conservatory training, or to make up for not having it.

I'll give you three examples, all from the same generation as Laura Ingalls Wilder.

**Cécile Chaminade**, born in Paris in 1857, was the daughter of the manager of an insurance firm. Her mother was her first piano teacher, and she began composing as a child. When she was ten, professors at the Paris Conservatory recommended that she be enrolled for full time study. Her father forbade it but allowed her to study composition in private lessons instead. She made her professional piano debut in 1877 at the Salle de Pleyel in Paris, and for the next ten years gave concerts, and composed in the larger genres: symphony, concerto, and opera.

Then her father died in 1887. The family was suddenly poor, and she had to compose in forms that would sell, like solo songs and piano music. She toured widely (at least once in the United States), giving concerts of her own music. Her works gained a widespread popular following. More than one hundred American music clubs were named for her.

Chaminade's compositions possess a buoyant charm which disguises their effortless technical skill.

**Ethel Smyth** overcame the constraints of her prosperous English military background by open rebellion. She was taught piano and theory as ladylike accomplishments, then horrified her family by demanding to be sent to Leipzig to study at the Conservatorium.

In General Smyth's circle no respectable woman traveled or lived un-chaperoned abroad, and he told Ethel he would rather see her dead than send her to Leipzig. Daily scenes ensued, and seventeen-year-old Ethel went on a two-year progressive domestic strike, finally confining herself to her room and refusing to go to church, sing at dinner parties, go riding, or speak to anyone.

The embattled General Smyth conceded defeat and sent Ethel to Leipzig in 1877. She met, and was encouraged by, Brahms, Grieg, Tchaikovsky, and Dvorák, and developed a Brahmsian idiom in her own compositions.

In 1910, Smyth met Emmeline Pankhurst, the founder of the British women's suffrage movement and head of the militant and extremely well organized Women's Social and Political Union. Struck by Mrs. Pankhurst's mesmerizing public speeches, Smyth pledged to give up music for two years and devote herself to the cause of votes for women. In 1911, her "March of the Women" was premiered at a suffrage rally in the Albert Hall. It became the battle anthem for the women's suffrage movement in England. Its most famous performance took place in Holloway Gaol, where Ethel Smyth was serving time for smashing the windows of an anti-suffrage Member of Parliament. She conducted an impromptu chorus of her fellow inmates, waving her toothbrush.

**Amy Beach** was born in Henniker, New Hampshire, the same year as Laura Ingalls Wilder: 1867. Before age two, she sang harmonically correct alto parts to her mother's lullabies. Her parents recognized her musical genius, and when she was eight moved to Boston so she could participate in the rich musical culture there. But they limited her formal music training to some tutoring in harmony, refusing to send her to Europe for conservatory training.

Beach, a child piano prodigy, was always grateful she was never exploited like the child Mozart. But her isolation increased after age 18, when she married--or was married off to--H.H.A. Beach, a middle-aged Boston doctor and musical amateur. He preferred she not perform in public after their marriage.

So from age 18 until her childless widowhood at age 43, Amy Beach worked mostly alone in the main salon of her husband's Commonwealth Avenue townhouse. They fitted it up with a grand piano, and with curtained music cabinets which folded shut to convert the studio into a parlor. Servants took care of the house.

Amy Beach taught herself orchestration by translating Berlioz's treatise and then studying it, and also by score study, attending symphony concerts, and making encyclopedic

notes of what she heard. Few composers of any era have possessed her raw musical ability, her intelligence, and her iron determination and self-discipline through years of solitary study, with very little feedback from other professional musicians.

While the circumstances of her marriage seem both confining and repulsive to us now, Beach's husband gave her a place, huge blocks of time, and sympathetic support for composing. These are jewels beyond price to harassed, double-shift women composers who support themselves by studio teaching, especially when they combine it with "the pram in the hall."

Beach composed in all major classical genres, including symphony, concerto, and Mass, and wrote many choral works, including 30 for women's voices. After her husband's death in 1910, she resumed touring as a piano soloist, spending her winters on the concert circuit and her summers often at the MacDowell Colony, composing.

Let's look back at that picture of the Williams choir in 1964, the one that was about to become extinct. Does it look different to you now? It's still twenty-five girls with funny hair in funny choir robes. But to me they were not a half-choir engaged in the musical equivalent of half-court basketball, waiting for tenors and basses to make them into a real choir. They were the inheritors and practitioners of a vigorous musical culture. I am so proud I was one of them.