

## Reviews

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### Jill Halstead, *The Woman Composer: Creativity and the Gendered Politics of Composition*

Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997

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Stand on any day at the epicentre of Borders, the mega-store for books in the Jam Factory in Chapel Street, and you will see, stretching away in every direction, wall to ceiling shelves and free-standing fixtures crammed with books on every imaginable subject. In the face of such superfluity, one question presses urgently as I pick up any book to browse: Why has this book been written?

It is a question that also pressed as I read *The Woman Composer: Creativity and the Gendered Politics of Musical Composition* by Jill Halstead. The inside flap of the dust jacket provided the official answer. This book was written to explore the reasons why there have been and continue to be so few women composers. 'Why are women composers still such a rarity in Britain at the end of the twentieth century' is the question that lies at the heart of this study of female composition, it proclaims.

But is this, in fact, the question? Is it that women composers are so rare a phenomenon? The two volumes of Aaron Cohen's *International Encyclopedia of Women Composers* (cited in Halstead's long and comprehensive bibliography) would seem to argue against that idea. Or is it rather that women composers, though existing in ever greater numbers as composition classes in the colleges and conservatoria become open to all students including females, are still largely invisible in our public cultural consciousness. It is this latter proposition which is the more usual feminist argument. Indeed, in this book, there seems to be a wavering between 'invisibility' and 'scarcity,' where 'scarcity' is taken to mean not represented in certain situations, for example, in the programming for the British Prom Concerts in 1995. Feminist writers would not in general equate invisibility with scarcity and concede defeat in terms of numbers in this way.

I must admit my heart gave a little leap of anticipation when I read (p. vii) that the inspiration for this book was Germaine Greer's germinal and marvellous book on women artists, *The Obstacle Race* (London, 1979). There are certain superficial similarities of approach in the book's thematic organisation, but in the end any comparison is disappointing for Halstead lacks Greer's polemical brilliance and cannot match the sharp energy of her thought or the steely brilliance of her writing. There are other difficulties, too.

It is awkward to write a book from a series of negative propositions. This book is committed to identifying the factors that affect female creativity negatively (p. ix), exploring the physiological, social and political factors that have inhibited women from pursuing careers as composers. Now Greer, too, addresses negative issues—perhaps it is impossible to write about

women's creativity without considering the negative factors which may inhibit it: conflicts of motivation, practical difficulties, in Greer's words, 'the obstacles in the race for achievement.' But to admit difficulties is not the same as to admit defeat, and there hangs over Halstead's book an aura of defeat. Perhaps it rises out of her decision to choose, as biographical subjects, 'women who have experienced difficulties' rather than (according to her) the more usual choice of women who, in spite of difficulties, have achieved success. Whatever the reason, I finished this book feeling rather dispirited and overwhelmed by the weight of adverse evidence presented—not the author's intention, I am sure—and without the reassurance that it is often in the face of difficulties and inhibitions that women's inventiveness is shaped.

Whereas Greer ranges over centuries of women's creativity and illuminates her discourse with such shining examples of—dare I say it?—female genius as Artemisia Gentileschi, Halstead keeps her biographical focus deliberately narrow. Nine composers of twentieth-century Britain, however engaging their life stories may be, are hardly sufficient to argue a case against such an overwhelming collection of contrary evidence as is collected in Halstead's book, let alone win it. There is no 'magnificent exception' here. Nonetheless, I found the chapters in which the life stories of these nine women were discussed to be the most humanly interesting. Their stories are movingly told, though they are too brief and in the end curiously disappointing. Perhaps more of the human voices of these women and less of clinical analysis of the data their stories provide would have given the book more depth, for depth is not just a matter of detail, but of richness.

Again, whereas Greer could show us, through generous illustrations, some samples of the work of the artists under discussion, it is curiously unfulfilling to have no notion at all of the sound created by the women whose creative aspirations carry such weight in Halstead's book. If no accompanying compact disc were practicable, at least a discography would have served to give substance to the discussion. Or is defeat so absolute that not a single note has been recorded?

*The Woman Composer* is essentially an extensive, wide-ranging, interdisciplinary and thematically organised literature survey, and therein lies its potential usefulness as a teaching tool, for I do not think that this book will influence popular opinion or change the perceived misogyny of public cultural politics. Some of the material reviewed is familiar, including classics of the new feminist musicology by authors such as McClary, Citron, Solie, and Neuls-Bates. Other material is less familiar: earlier salvos in the ongoing arguments of nature versus nurture; essentialism versus construction; and biological determinism versus social conditioning. The interdisciplinary focus is, the author claims, a novelty in the literature about women composers. The bibliography is extensive and there is good material for discussion in the various chapters.

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