

A Mix of Images: Women

Restoring the musical world of dead European males has created new, egalitarian opportunities for women musicians

by Shulamit Kleinerman

A BAROQUE VIOLINIST I know jokes that he often feels like a token male in his orchestras' string sections. That would be unlikely in the mainstream classical music world, where even today women are often outnumbered. A glance over the rosters of early music ensembles, however, suggests that women thrive in historical performance. Baroque music, particularly in its larger-scale contexts, offers the most direct contrast with the classical music mainstream. While female musicians seldom take the baton with high-profile modern orchestras, for example, several of the best-loved Baroque orchestras in North America are directed by women.

What draws so many women to early music? I asked five Baroque musicians to share their thoughts about the phenomenon and to describe their own

experiences as women in the field.

Monica Huggett, who directs the Portland Baroque Orchestra and divides her time between the United States and her native England, has been a prominent violinist in the early music world since the 1970s. Violinist **Ingrid Matthews** is music director of the Seattle Baroque Orchestra. **Kate van Orden** is a musicologist at the University of California, Berkeley, and an active bassoonist. **Jennifer Griesbach** is a harpsichordist, opera director, and specialist in Baroque gesture; when I spoke with her, she had just served as assistant stage director of the Boston Early Music Festival's 2003 performances of Conradi's *Ariadne*. New York soprano **Melissa Fogarty** performs 17th- and 18th-century operatic roles and chamber repertoire.

Most of these performers share a sense that there are more women in early music than in modern performance: "We've often had almost all women in the orchestra," Matthews notes. There is also a consensus that historical performance is generally a freer field, artistically and socially, than the mainstream milieu in which the musicians received their basic training. In our conversations, they talked about what distinguishes early music's professional culture from that of modern performance. They also spoke evocatively of their identification with the musical cultures of past eras and of the sense of discovery that enriches their own music-making.

Early and egalitarian

One of the most distinctive aspects of the early music culture is its "do-it-yourself" ethos. Each of the women I spoke with suggested that historical performance offered her a creative immediacy that had been missing from her studies within classical music's dominant culture. Griesbach recalls learning figured bass as an undergraduate. "Playing



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in Baroque Music

continuo felt like being given a paintbrush and a paint-by-numbers set and told, 'You can change the colors, you can go outside the lines. Here's a general idea of what we're going for and the rest is up to you.' I really relished that freedom to create within the constraints of a piece in a much more fundamental way than you get to when all the notes are prescribed."

When each musician enjoys this sense of independence, Griesbach suggests, it can change the dynamic of the entire group. She makes a comparison to the mainstream performance world, with its emphasis on large, authoritarian institutions like symphony orchestras. "In early music, a lot of us cut our teeth in small ensembles, where it's a lot easier to hone your musical leadership skills. Everyone has to contribute a lot to their part – ornamenting, realizing continuo lines – much more than what's written on the page. So there's a collaborative structure already written into making the music, which sometimes translates into a more collaborative structure for the group." This shift is perhaps particularly meaningful for women, since positions of authority in the big modern orchestras have traditionally been held by men. "I think having this place in chamber music has allowed more women to move on into leadership positions."

Matthews muses further about the importance of the collaborative spirit for women. "Some of the things that make early music work are characteristics traditionally associated with the feminine. When you play without a conductor, it's necessary for every person to be expressive with his or her body language, as well as receptive. In our culture, women, more commonly than men, are socialized to pay a lot of attention to how other people are feeling, and that quality can breed good musicianship."

In her first years with a Baroque



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– Kate van Orden

instrument, Matthews, like Griesbach, found that early music fostered a sense of exploration. "Just as a Baroque violin is less standardized than a modern violin, I feel like style is less standardized among early music performers. In my case, starting to play concerts with different people made me very conscious of what I liked and what I didn't



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like, and how I would want to do things."

Perhaps there is something inherently egalitarian about historical performance's insistence that everyone should go back to the sources for him- or herself, as well as experiment with other performers' technical or stylistic solutions. An experience like this is very dif-

PHOTO: WILLIAM STICKNEY

Women in Baroque Music

ferent from mainstream training, where students are often taught to reproduce the techniques and interpretations of teachers who have inherited their authority from a line of masters stretching back to the 19th century. That monolithic tradition has almost always been handed down by men.

But it doesn't seem that anybody specifically set out to make early music a more amenable environment for women. Musicians who find their way to early music are generally following their ears first, only later speculating about the cultural baggage that accrues to musical aesthetics. "I was a Baroque violinist waiting to be," reflects Huggett, who felt alienated by modern aesthetic presumptions as a conservatory student. She describes a master class with Yehudi Menuhin in which she played a slow passage in a Bach concerto "quite softly," emphasizing the melody's sweetness. "Menuhin sort of criticized me for that: 'You should play it out!' But isn't it nice to have some variation? I never fitted the role of a modern violinist."

Menuhin's directive is a commonplace of modern instrumental training. "There's such a culture of playing to the back row of the hall and vibrating and just being absolutely as projecting as possible," bassoonist van Orden comments of the typical mainstream sound. "And maybe that's not always quite so interesting." Whether this ideal of sound has anything to do with the 19th- and 20th-century pedagogical tradition's male-centeredness, van Orden adds, "depends on whether you think style is gendered or not."

Considering that the desirable modern sound is often described with metaphors of physical strength, of raw muscle power, it is intriguing to consider how the style might be influenced by ideals of masculinity. These are modern ideals; cultured men in the 17th and 18th centuries valued a kind of grace and restraint that modern masculinity eschews. (One has only to think of Baroque dance, in which men and

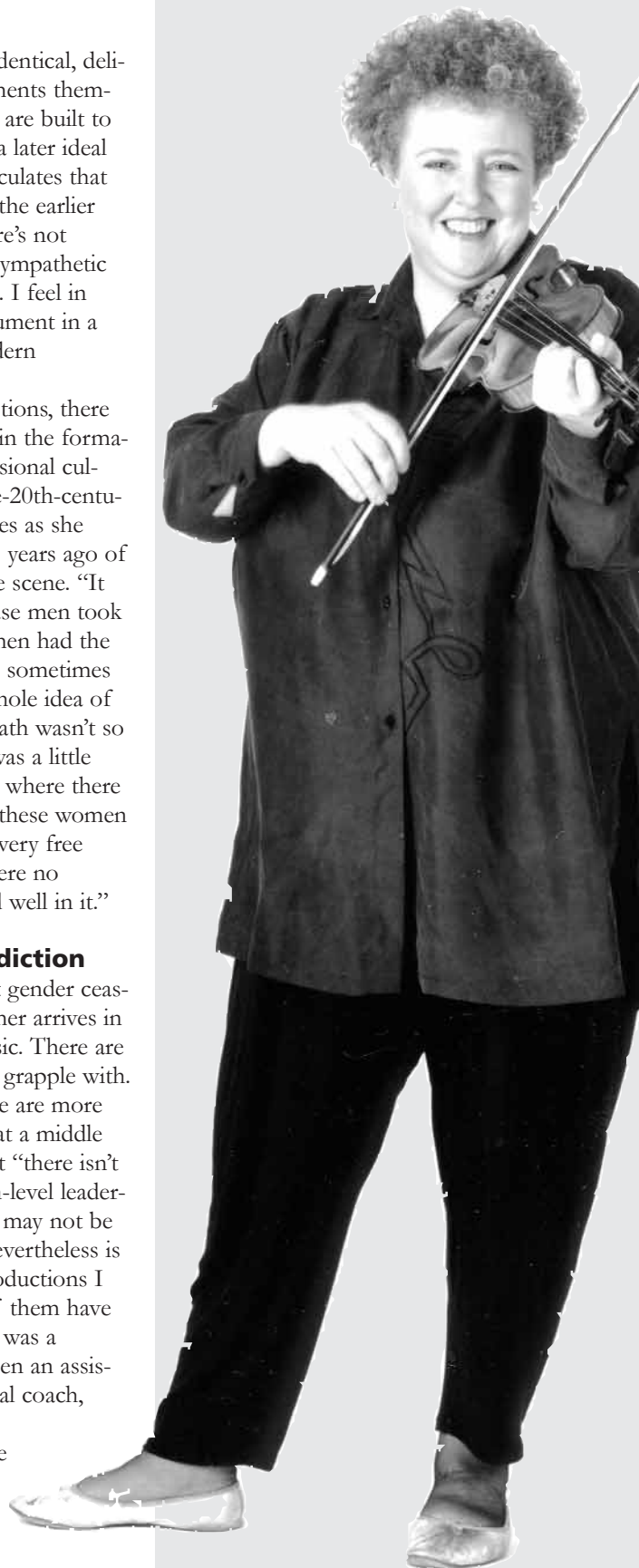
women almost always use identical, delicate steps.) Modern instruments themselves, van Orden suggests, are built to suit body types favored by a later ideal of masculinity, and she speculates that some women might prefer the earlier hardware. "I wonder if there's not something more fleet and sympathetic about the early instruments. I feel in contact with my early instrument in a way that I don't with a modern instrument."

Alongside aesthetic questions, there have been practical factors in the formation of early music's professional culture. Huggett considers late-20th-century socio-economic influences as she describes the emergence 25 years ago of London's Baroque freelance scene. "It was mostly women – because men took the symphony jobs, so women had the time. And maybe they were sometimes supported by others; the whole idea of women being on a career path wasn't so established then. So there was a little niche of the classical world where there wasn't reliable income, but these women didn't really mind. It was a very free milieu, so new that there were no parameters, and women did well in it."

Freedom and contradiction

All this is not to say that gender ceases to matter once a performer arrives in the safe haven of early music. There are still some contradictions to grapple with. "My perception is that there are more women in leadership roles at a middle level," Griesbach offers, but "there isn't equality yet among the high-level leadership. My experience, which may not be totally representative but nevertheless is telling, is that out of 19 productions I have directed, only three of them have had a musical director who was a woman. When there has been an assistant conductor or head vocal coach, that has also been a man."

On the other hand, there doesn't seem to be any barrier to virtuosic performance by women, in



On a recital tour, Monica Huggett was once specifically requested to appear in a dress. (“The man putting it together told them, ‘Forget it, it’s not going to happen!’”)

either the classical scene generally or early music in particular. Van Orden mentions the leading violinists of some of the orchestras with which she performs, such as Philharmonia Baroque and Tafelmusik. “I find the audiences are full of respect for what Elizabeth Blumenstock and Kati Kyme and Jeanne Lamon do on their instruments. The audiences do go wild. Women are very visible.”

But Matthews notes that being on display can raise particular concerns for women. “I think we can’t escape the fact that, for women on stage, image is a big thing. People create a whole story around how performers look – even in matters of dress.” She notes that unlike men, with their suits and tails, women have no professional “uniform” to fall back on. “Women are vulnerable to judgment for their choices all the time on stage. But I like being on stage, I like getting dressed up for a concert, and it is challenging to know what degree of glamour to attempt.” Matthews adds that the pressures that come with being looked at – and perhaps listened to – differently from men are usually subtle, but there are occasional blatant reminders. After a concert in which she had performed as a member of the ensemble La Luna, one of the funders of the hosting series told her that he had “sure enjoyed watching you wiggle.” On a recital tour, Huggett was once specifically requested to appear in a dress. (“The man putting it together told them, ‘Forget it, it’s not going to happen!’”)

But just as historical performance encourages musical exploration, notes soprano Fogarty, it can also offer the opportunity to play creatively with image. “I think that especially if we’re involved in our own groups, we have the liberty to present ourselves the way we want.” She describes her work in Duo

Seraphim (a collaboration with Griesbach) and with Ensemble for the Seicento. “I don’t wear a diva gown for these things. I play Baroque guitar, and it’s a totally different image.” To begin with, she wears pants for comfort. “They won’t be jeans, as they were in the rock band I was in in school; they’ll probably be black velvet pants. I’ll still be kind of dressed up, but I won’t look like some decked-out diva, and I’ll be jamming on my Baroque guitar. So it’s this mix of images.

“I think that what might draw some women to early music,” she speculates, “is that there’s less pressure to be a prima donna, where every day you have to act the part of a star in order to be perceived as having the potential to get to the next step. In early music, I think there might really be more freedom to just be an artist.”

Van Orden agrees. “It’s probably worth saying that you can just go out and have a career and be who you are. There are women with all different kinds of personalities and approaches to their stage presences and marketing themselves.” She describes how Tafelmusik director Jeanne Lamon changed the spelling of her first name, adding the last two letters to avoid confusion among French Canadians, who would read “Jean” as the equivalent of “John.” Lamon’s example suggests that women in early music need not downplay their femaleness in order to be successful, as they may feel pressured to do in some fields.

Behind such public concerns can lie a more personal project. Questions of how a performer looks onstage or what associations her name brings up in print might seem trivial compared to the issue of how she sounds. But what musicians see around them in their formative years – and how they are seen by others – can give them ideas about what they have to say as a performer.

“When I was younger,” Huggett recalls, “my friends used to say, ‘It’s so strange, Monica, you drive around on

motorcycles and yet your playing is so feminine.” What did they mean by that? “My playing then – not so much now – was very refined and rather perfect: clean, neat, and probably within a rather limited emotional sphere.” Huggett adds that this was “not my true adult nature.” An entirely different set of images informed her idea of what she could be like as a player, and it plays a central role whenever she tells the story of how she came to early music. “I wanted to be a rock guitarist and take drugs and die at 30, to be that kind of person,” she explains wryly. “What I found eventually was that I could be much more like that than I ever thought was possible. I found that breadth of expression in

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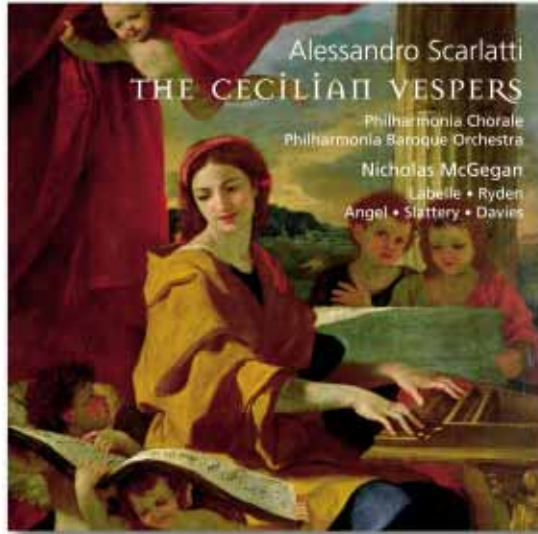
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Baroque music." She mentions guitarists like Eric Clapton among her musical influences.

Fogarty sang and played bass guitar in a rock band while she was studying voice at Eastman, "and I was very serious about that going somewhere." Then she discovered the florid, ornamental 17th-century Italian repertoire. "Having that kind of liberty in classical music, that kind of freedom, was totally new to me. Since I was a rock musician – and I was also listening to a ton of jazz in college – I was really taken by it."

Fogarty suggests that the influence of popular music, whether direct like hers or more wishful like Huggett's, may be even more accessible to young women today. Having noticed increasing numbers of young women singers accompanying themselves with guitars at early music workshops, Fogarty wonders whether these early musicians have been inspired by a "resurgence of female singer-songwriters in the last ten years. Although a singer needs stylistic training to sing (and play!) 17th-century music, once that's in place, there's not too much difference from playing guitar and singing stuff written today. And it just so happens that there were a lot of women in the 17th century who played some kind of plucked instrument and sang. So it's an interesting coincidence that this is happening today. We'll probably see more of it."

Historical context

What about women's presence in the Baroque period? In a musical community that values knowledge of historical contexts, the question is especially welcome. Griesbach appreciates the opportunity to program compositions by women because "I know their situation made it difficult to write music and have it transmitted and published. But it seems like there's been enough uncovered that we can start to just include women composers in our programs when we find pieces that we like, without having to make a big to-do about it."

"It's gratifying to recognize that these

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are not weak pieces on the program,” adds Matthews. “Early music audiences, by definition I think, are ready to accept things they’ve never heard of. I think that’s part of what draws people to early music.” Matthews has performed and recorded the violin sonatas of Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre, who was famous during the reign of Louis XIV as a harpsichord prodigy and later as a composer of keyboard music and an opera. When Fogarty discovered early music in college, she was particularly inspired by the Venetian vocal composer Barbara Strozzi.

The most visible female legacy from the Baroque is probably the complex image of the operatic prima donna. Although leading ladies received public adulation, the roles they sang often seem to have offered cautionary tales of

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virtuosity that crossed the line of feminine decorum.

Fogarty describes one experience of bringing to life a character burdened with 18th-century anxieties about female expressiveness. Clori, in Handel’s cantata *Clori, Tirsi, e Fileno*, is the very picture of inconstancy, carrying on with both male characters.

Her moral character is suggested in part by the changeableness of her musical material. After a virtuosic rage aria, in which she berates Tirsi for his lack of trust, comes “this bizarre chromatic recitative. You don’t know where it’s going next: is this Carissimi or is this Wagner?” The recitative is followed in turn by a light, coquettish minuet in which Clori explains her plot to keep both lovers in thrall. “This woman is not particularly stable – no question! – which made the role really fun to play. But believe me, my feminist sensibilities were a little bit shaken when I did it.”

It may be significant that, as the only vocalist among this article’s interviewees, Fogarty is also the only one not to

maintain a belief that early music is populated by women more heavily than classical music in general. “I wouldn’t notice that,” she explains, “because there’s always a bazillion sopranos in the singing world.” Whatever inheritance the Baroque prima donnas left their modern-day counterparts, it is intriguing to note how many more women than men sing art music today. It might be worth inquiring into the basis of what seems to be a cultural association between vocal music-making and the feminine.

One thing vocal music can reveal is how live and provocative the question of gender in performance can be. Fogarty discusses the issue of using male or female singers on high parts and suggests that such decisions can have more to do with present-day tastes than with historical faithfulness. She points to the current popularity of countertenors as evidence of the fascination of the new or the seemingly exotic. “They’re the new divas. It only partially has something to do with historical performance. A lot of roles that would have been sung by women, historically speaking” – trouser roles in particular – “are now being sung by countertenors.” There are repercussions beyond those of vocal or visual aesthetics. “The singing world is already highly competitive for women, so it’s sad to see how these men are encroaching on some women’s roles.”

Such gender-swapping in casting can also go the other way. Fogarty tells of singing a maid role in Alessandro Scarlatti’s *L’Aldimiro* that, in accordance with a tradition of comically cross-dressed female servants, would originally have been played by a castrato. The modern tendency to recast singers according to their real-life sex perhaps reveals a certain poverty of imagination, a lack of playfulness in the modern gender sensibility that we bring to the repertoire. “It was just a wild gender farce. That’s an operatic tradition, and I wonder if it’s going to be lost.”

Although Griesbach appreciates the comic possibilities of cross-casting, she prefers to emphasize the dramatic content over the sex of the singer playing the part. “We get so confused and

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wrapped up in whether it's a man or a woman embodying a role. But there's a way in which that doesn't matter as much as some other elements. The character a singer can create matters more to me than his or her physical sex. The quality of the voice, the way a singer moves and carries her- or himself – elements that go into the construction of the character's gender, and much more."

The plots themselves, Griesbach allows, can carry overt cultural prejudices. But she believes that idealistic approaches aimed at undoing historical sexism may miss the mark. "My early reading of feminist theory in college made me wonder if the only responsible way to touch a lot of the operatic repertory was to be highly deconstructionist, or ironic, or just do something else entirely. All those women pining away, or dying horrible deaths; all those servants squashed by the social order. Still, I was drawn to this work, and I kept finding in the process of working that the operas were peopled with strong, vital characters who take action and make decisions. They might not have modern choices available to them, but these operas have a lot to say about what it means to be human, and a lot of that message is carried by the female characters.

"I do identify strongly with the female characters in my work, and I often stage shows where a female character is in a really untenable situation – and I wish I could just rewrite the play and get them out of it. But then I wish I could rewrite the news headlines, too. One of the gifts of staging, and being in the arts in general, is that you get to live temporarily in a dramatic situation, or in an emotional landscape. You let it work on you, and hopefully through you, so that it can affect someone else. And it's always more complicated than it first looks – rather like life." ❧

Shulamit Kleinerman writes about music, performs as a member of Seattle Early Dance, plays Renaissance violin with the living-history ensemble Blood, Love and Rhetoric, and teaches violin and preschool enrichment.