Women In Music Essay, Research Paper

History shows that women were not as big of participants in music as men until later in the medieval era. This is due to many obstacles that faced women disabling them from singing, playing any instruments, or even composing music. Although barriers were present, many women and nuns were able to surpass them, and make use of their abilities and skills.

Women composers had many barriers to pass in order to be able to use their skills and compose music and chants. One main obstacle blocking their way was the inability to learn and understand the art and sciences due to the lack of schooling. Education was vital for such musicians; especially that acceleration of specialization in western music broke many of the traditional links between women and music. The complexity required notation, sometimes separating the composer from those who performed the score. Development of musical establishments and institutions, to which women were denied access, was a main obstacle in the way of women who desire to pursue their musical interest.

Women were required to fulfill their “traditional roles “, and forget the idea of pursuing music. As illustrated in a dialogue between Christine de Pisan and Reason:

[Christine]“My lady, since they [women] have minds skilled in conceptualizing and learning, just like men, why don’t women learn more?”

She [Reason] replied, “Because, my daughter, the public does not require them to get involved in the affairs which men are commissioned to execute?. It is enough for women to perform the usual duties to which the are ordained.” (Marshall, 141)

These “usual duties” were meant to be those of keeping a house and mothering children; they did not include developing specialized musical skills. It is easy to explain the scarcity of musical works by women as a result of the educational and social obstacles confronting female musicians. However, few clearly managed to overcome these obstacles and their creativity remains largely unacknowledged because of the way modern scholarship has interpreted surviving evidence about them. Many women who had created their own music, either through financial patronage or personal influence have been classified as “sponsors’ and thereby denied credit as active participants in the creative process.

Many of the women who performed polyphonic psalms, mass propers, and motets were nuns. Music functioned as the literal and symbolic projection of nuns’ voices into the world of the urban patriciate whence they had come. In Federigo Borrowmeo’s view, nuns represented “the most select portion of the flock of Christ,” a special status of holy virgins consecrated to God. Their monasteries were characterized by several features that reinforced this idea. The most notable feature is the physical separation by means of a wall in the primary space for musical performance, the monastic church. The ritual space of female monastic choirs, thus distanced from the outside world, provided an earthly prefiguration of the heavenly Jerusalem in the eyes (and ears) of the holy father and many of his lay contemporaries.

Women were able to surpass the obstacles they were facing, and still were able to perform and compose music. Women played an important role in music during the medieval era. Although they were not accepted socially, but by time, they moved along and followed what they believed in, and eventually, got it.

1. Marshall, Kimberly. “Women’s Musical Traditions”

2. Kamien, Roger. “Music An Appreciation”