Oliveros: And Don't Call Them "Lady" Composers

An artist who works in acoustic, electronic, and mixed performance media, Pauline Oliveros (born 1932) resigned from an academic career to be an independent composer/performer. She has received numerous awards, commissions, and grants for her work in composition, performance, music therapy, and criticism. Many of her purely electronic works were produced in the 1960s, when she was co-director of the San Francisco Tape Center and director of the Mills Tape Music Center. Her multimedia works incorporate dramatic narrative, electronic sound sources (both precomposed and improvised), acoustic sound sources, improvisation, film, text, and choreography. An accomplished performer on the piano, accordion, horn, and violin, she often scores her instrumental works for strikingly diverse combinations. She has written many articles on music and has published two books: Pauline's Proverbs (1976) and Software for People: Collected Writings, 1963–80 (1984). In response to an article published in The New York Times on the theme “why there are no great women composers,” she wrote “And Don’t Call Them ‘Lady’ Composers” (1970), a frank discussion of the professional barriers faced by women composers.

Why have there been no “great” women composers? The question is often asked. The answer is no mystery. In the past, talent, education, ability, interests, motivation were irrelevant because being female was a unique qualification for domestic work and for continual obedience to and dependence upon men.

This is no less true today. Women have been taught to despise activity outside of the domestic realm as unfeminine, just as men have been taught to despise...
domestic duties. For men, independence, mobility and creative action are imperative. Society has perpetuated an unnatural atmosphere which encourages distortions such as "girl" used as a bad word by little boys from the age of nine or ten. From infancy, boys are wrapped in blue blankets and continually directed against what is considered feminine activity. What kind of self-image can little girls have, then, with half their peers despising them because they have been discouraged from so-called masculine activity and wrapped in pink blankets?

The distortion continues when puberty arrives and boys turn to girls as sex objects but do not understand how to relate on other important levels. Consider the divorce rate! No matter what her achievements might be, when the time comes, a woman is expected to knuckle under, pay attention to her feminine duties and obediently follow her husband wherever his endeavor or inclination takes him—no matter how detrimental it might to be to her own.

A well-known contemporary composer has a wife who is also a competent composer. They travel together extensively and often return to the same places for performances of his work. She is rarely if ever solicited for her own work and no one seems to see anything wrong with constantly ignoring her output while continually seeking out his husband's work.

Many critics and professors cannot refer to women who are also composers without using cute or condescending language. She is a "lady composer." Rightly, this expression is anathema to many self-respecting women composers. It effectively separates women's efforts from the mainstream. According to the Dictionary of American Slang, "lady" used in such a context is almost always insulting or sarcastic. What critic today speaks of a "gentleman composer"?

It is still true that unless she is super-excellent, the woman in music will always be subjugated, while men of the same or lesser talent will find places for themselves. It is not enough that a woman chooses to be a composer or conductor or to play instruments formerly played exclusively by men; she cannot escape being squashed in her efforts—if not directly, then by subtle and insidious exclusion by her male counterparts.

And yet some women do break through. The current Schwann Catalog lists over one thousand different composers. Clara Schumann of the Romantic Period and Elizabeth J. de la Guerre of the Baroque are the sole representatives for women composers of the past. But on the positive side, over seventy five percent of those listed are composers of the present and twenty four of these are women. These approximate statistics point to two happy trends: 1) that composers of our time are no longer ignored, and 2) that women could be emerging from musical subjugation. (It is significant that in a biography of Schumann that I have read, Clara is always talked about as a pianist, not a composer, and she is quoted as saying "I'd give my life for Robert.")

The first of the two trends is developing even though the majority of performers do not include contemporary music in their repertoire and private teachers seldom encourage their students to try new music or even to become acquainted with their local composers. Agencies such as the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations have helped establish centers for new music in universities across the country, and independent organizations such as the Once Group of Ann Arbor and the San Francisco Tape Music Center promoted lively programs of new music throughout the nineteen sixties. Isolated individual efforts throughout the country have gradually created an active, new music network.

At last, the symphony and opera organizations may have to wake up to the fact that music of our time is necessary to draw audiences from the people under thirty. The mass media, radio, TV and the press could have greater influence in encouraging American music by ending the competition between music of the past and music of the present. Many composers of today are not interested in the criteria applied by critics to their work and it is up to the critic to discern new criteria by going to the composer. With more performances of new works at which the composers are present, and with the greater mobility of our society, critics have a unique opportunity—a duty—to converse directly with the composer. Then (since performers are often irresponsible with new works because of disrespect for or lack of established models), works with which the critics have familiarized themselves would escape some scathing misjudgments due to poor performances. The ideal critic could not only interpret technically and encourage an atmosphere which is sympathetic to the phenomenon of new music, but present the composer as a real and reasonable person to audience. Certainly, no "great" composer, especially a woman, has a chance to emerge in a society which believes that all "great" music has been written by those long dead.

The second trend is, of course, dependent on the first because of the cultural deprivation of women in the past. Critics do a great deal of damage by wishing to discover "greatness." It does not matter that not all composers are great composers; it matters that this activity be encouraged among all the population, that we communicate with each other in nondestructive ways. Women composers are often dismissed as minor or light-weight talents on the basis of one work by critics who have never examined their scores or waited for later developments. Men do not have to commit sexual suicide in order to encourage their sisters in music. Since they have been on top for so long, they could seek out women and encourage them in all professional fields. Libraries of women's music should be established. Women need to know what they can achieve. Critics can quit being cute and start studying scores.

Near the beginning of this century, Nikola Tesla, electrical engineer and inventor of electrical power from alternating current, predicted that women will some day unleash their enormous creative potential and for time will excel men in all fields because they have been so long dormant. Certainly the greatest problems of society will never be solved until an egalitarian atmosphere utilizing the total creative energies exists among all men and women.