

Filling in the Gaps Author(s): Amy C. Beal

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**Filling in the Gaps: Some Concluding Thoughts
on Music History and Biography
Amy C. Beal**

The six papers that form the present colloquy on Jewish studies and music have stimulated my own recent thinking about biographical research and writing, while also currently teaching a graduate seminar on American music historiography. Several years ago, when I was writing my book about the (non-Jewish) German composer Johanna Beyer, who permanently left Germany in 1923, I was faced with the problem that almost nothing was known about her life before she settled in New York City at about the age of forty-five.⁴⁸ How does a biographer deal with a lack of information for that much of a person's life? (Beyer would live only another twenty-one —scantly documented — years, passing away in 1944.) This led me also to consider the differences between writing about famous, well-documented people, as opposed to non-famous, somewhat (or completely) forgotten people. Sometimes that divide is clearly gendered. As historian Jill Lepore put it in her biography of Benjamin Franklin's sister Jane, we have been handed down "histories of great men, and novels about little women."⁴⁹ Or, in the words of Virginia Woolf scholar Ellen Bayuk Rosenman: "Especially when history is the property of men, women's stories are a necessary fiction."⁵⁰ Historians' potentially latent disdain for female subjects is embedded in our fiction and non-

My comments printed here are modified from my introductory comments made in my role as moderator of the Jewish Studies and Music Panel held at the AMS in Rochester, New York, on 9 November 2017.

⁴⁸Amy C. Beal, *Johanna Beyer*, Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015.

⁴⁹Jill Lepore, *Book of Ages: The Life and Opinions of Jane Franklin* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013): 241.

⁵⁰Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, *A Room of One's Own: Women Writers and the Politics of Creativity* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995): 69.

fiction alike, and also in works that blur the two. So the American writer of historical fiction, Wallace Stegner, speaking as the (male) narrator of his novel *Angle of Repose*:

I have heard publishers, lamenting their hard life over Scotch and soda, complain that they must read a hundred bad manuscripts to find one good one. Having practiced the trade of history, I feel no stir of sympathy. A historian scans a thousand documents to find one fact that he can use. If he is working with correspondence, as I am, and with the correspondence of a woman to boot, he will wade toward his little islands of information through a dismal swamp of recipes, housekeeping details, children's diseases, insignificant visitors, inclusive conversations with people unknown to the historian, and recitations of what the writer did yesterday. [. . .] Nothing there that I want to know about, neither events nor feelings. I have to keep turning the pages of [grandmother Susan Ward's] chatty, empty letters [from Boise] for a long time before I find any that are worth stopping at.⁵¹

Lately I have been thinking a lot about the people who lurk in the decentralized areas of our music-historical narratives — the shadows, margins, and footnotes of history. Margins and footnotes are where we put ancillary things that we are willing to allow to be overlooked — not the main story. They are like shadows, where things can hide, or be hidden, secondary, if explored at all. Many scholars, including those sharing their recent research

⁵¹ Wallace Stegner, *Angle of Repose* (Doubleday, 1971): 367.

in this current colloquy, are working purposefully to bring lost or forgotten voices back into the conversation about what really happened in the past, to rescue them, metaphorically, from the edges of what we know already. Yet we are left with so many unknowns. In the city of Berlin, there are a number of monuments and/or public art works that draw attention to those who aren't there anymore: people, buildings, burned books. Those empty spaces are among us, and I sometimes imagine those who used to occupy them hovering around us, like ghosts waiting to be (re)seen. Again, I turn to Rosenman and her interpretation of *A Room of One's Own*:

Woolf writes of the "blank spaces" on library bookshelves where women's books should be, seeing not mere accidental absence but exclusion. It is the "books that were not there" that tell the tale of women's literary history. Woolf implies here a politics of absence, continuing the spatial imagery of her title as well as the imagery of vision, by defining these empty spaces as having been created by gender inequities. Although there is nothing there, that "nothing" still has meaning, just as rests have meaning in a system of musical notation. This is another version of re-vision: to see blank space as its own kind of historical record[. . .].⁵²

The tensions between fiction, history, and biography are thrown into sharp relief when we consider the kinds of sources and documentation that are either available and valued as sources of worthwhile information, or lost to history altogether. This is a special problem for scholars of the era of Nationalist Socialism or of Holocaust survivors, as in the case of several of the stories told in this colloquy, because so much documentation has been lost for very specific reasons. In both the writing of history

⁵² Rosenman, *A Room of One's Own*, 39f.

and in the study of historiography, we should be vigilant to pay close attention to the availability of sources and the contextual reasons for their inaccessibility or complete absence; public versus private lives; and the different challenges involved in writing biography on male or female subjects, from the famous to the unknown, whose lives and work may have been documented and valued in very different ways. We need to keep filling in the gaps of history.

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