

## In Her Own Words: Practitioner Contribution 4

### From Polymath to Portfolio Career – Reclaiming ‘Renaissance Woman’

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At some point in our journeys to becoming a professional – and often quite early on – we musicians typically narrow our focus to a particular discipline and hone our skills accordingly. Nonetheless, even within specialisms, many of us will go on to work across sectors and genres, continually adapting to different artistic and industry environments. Orchestral players, for instance, often teach and/or perform in chamber groups, while session musicians might improvise or adapt parts *in situ*, playing in pit bands by night. Classical composers arguably need to be as skilled at fundraising, networking, and writing programme notes as they are at writing music. This presents both opportunities and challenges, some of which apply particularly to women, as I’ve found in my own work across an unusually wide range of disciplines, from international performing and examining to composing and critical writing.<sup>1</sup>

When I graduated from the University of York in 1987, the term ‘portfolio career’ was a long way from being coined. My immediate need was to take stock after an academically high-flying but emotionally bruising few years, not helped by the homophobia I encountered coming out as gay. Moreover, I was one of only a few music students from a working-class background in the department at that time, as well as years from being equipped to face the serious abuse I had suffered in childhood. Finding support within a department which had, in those days, exclusively male and sometimes overtly sexist lecturers was not easy.

Immediately post-York, I gladly accepted invitations to join two new contemporary music ensembles as guitarist and percussionist: Jane’s Minstrels, founded by the distinguished soprano Jane Manning (in residence in my final year) and Icebreaker, a post-minimalist band inspired by the Dutch scene. I expected a short sojourn away from academia before returning to study for a PhD on Berg’s *Lulu*. But, with further performing and teaching commitments, it was over two decades before I eventually enrolled at King’s College, London, only for spine surgeries to stop play.

However, as I convalesced, exciting new writing and composing opportunities came along and, ultimately, the sheer breadth of my interests led me to pursue these alongside what was already a host of different freelance musical directions. While each has had highs and lows, none have proved especially progressive or regressive from a gender perspective relative to others. Rather, the central challenge has been juggling the mix in a world in which people are routinely pigeonholed – even if that is, ironically, as ‘polymath’ – often to the particular detriment of women.

Those who decry sexism in any industry are often challenged to define exactly how and to what extent this has directly affected their careers. For me as for many women, there have of course been clear instances, and further homophobia. But the main point – and this is especially poignant for those of us who have suffered sexual violence in any context – is that these are symptoms of a wider structural problem that permeates our culture, underpinning everything from everyday micro-aggressive ‘banter’ – and the ‘benevolent’ and ‘choice’ sexism so vividly described by Soraya Chemaly, and so often practised by women themselves<sup>2</sup> – to extreme misogyny and existential threat.

In my final year at York, I’d been propelled by male students’ ridicule of female composers – and by hearing the then London Sinfonietta artistic director Michael Vyner declare on national radio that ‘women can’t compose’ – to mount a three-day festival of women composers, *Women of Note*. With help from the violinist Lucy Russell, and others, the event was a success. But not before many run-ins with objectors, and a summons by a lecturer to answer (anonymous and incorrect) claims that men would be excluded from participating. Despite then chairing the student new music group ANeMonE, I had quietly stopped presenting my own compositions in year one.<sup>3</sup>

Today, gender inequality continues to be rife in music as elsewhere, with conscious, and unconscious bias of all kinds underpinned by unequal pay, discriminatory working conditions, and more. And of course sexist attitudes linger irrespective of the positive strides made. For instance, in my own experience, interviewees are still sometimes surprised when a mere journalist shows high levels of musical expertise; the more so if that journalist is female. Likewise, female music examiners are not always afforded the same respect in the field as their male counterparts, while female writers and critics too often find themselves wincing when male colleagues write inappropriately about, say, a female performer’s appearance.

The tired cliché that critics, teachers, musicologists, and so on only work in those arenas because they themselves can’t create or perform music

obviously falls down in my case, as it does in very many others'. Yet it persists, assuming as its creator ideal the usual pantheon of dead, white, male super-composers. The continued relative lack of women and black and minority-ethnic composers, conductors, professors, producers, and industry leaders – despite supposed social progress over the years – is a great cause for concern.

It is vital for our collective cultural health that women are enabled on equal terms with men to excel in all areas of music. At the same time, the lack of women in key places is an indication that the system itself needs complete reform. Multidisciplinary, portfolio working is now so widespread, for example, that, if it were held in greater social and economic esteem, women in particular would stand to benefit; not least those who interrupt careers to have children, or who choose to combine a career with parenting. Society might better equip young musicians to deal with the real world, rather than selling them spurious notions about 'talent' and being 'discovered' that very few will experience. Above all, it might facilitate a much-needed cultural shift away from unhelpful post-Romantic assumptions about the nature of creativity and genius that we see reflected in the worship of icons past and present from Beethoven to Beyoncé.

But social attitudes and economic practice would need to change radically for this to happen. While, on the surface, equality of opportunity appears to have improved since I graduated some thirty-four years ago, in reality the situation has barely changed for many women, with exceptions of course; Beyoncé has not come from nowhere. For others, it has actually worsened. The 2008 global economic crash and subsequent 'austerity' governmental policies have impacted women especially, with a devastating increase in poverty as the wealth of the richest few has spiralled.<sup>4</sup>

Recent surges in populist politics and religious fundamentalism are seeing hard-won moves towards gender equality threatened across the spectrum by social conservatives, with an extreme right emboldened by Trump in the USA, Brexit in the UK, and other movements around the globe. How far these developments have directly impacted women in music to date is hard to say. But the last decade hardly points to a blossoming of women's involvement, while savage cuts to arts funding and music education budgets do not bode well for a socially equitable future.

Alongside wider campaigns for social justice such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, much-needed quotas and new industry initiatives

are seeking to redress gender imbalances: the PRS Foundation and partners' Keychange project (also discussed in Chapter 16) is an excellent international example, whereby music festivals and organisations have pledged to achieve 50:50 gender parity in new commissions by 2022. Such campaigns – where they are not actively resisted as threats to the status quo – are often dismissed as identity politics. But the reality is that, taken together, in the current sociopolitical climate they form an important part of what's become a fight not just for equal representation within the arts, but for the arts themselves, and, indeed, for democracy; an aspiration which is in any case impossible to realise without gender parity.

Meanwhile, women – intersecting with the working classes and ethnic minorities – continue to be very much second-class economic citizens in music as elsewhere. In 2019, women are still far more likely than men to combine careers with unpaid domestic and caring roles, and we are likely to be less well paid than our male counterparts, and to receive less money for equal work.<sup>5</sup> For women musicians, this can mean being forced rather than choosing to work in multiple arenas simultaneously. And that's musicians in full- or part-time employment, with the concomitant rights to paid holidays, maternity leave, sick leave, and pensions that those statuses confer.

For freelancers like myself, without employment rights or support beyond the rudimentary benefits afforded *in extremis* by an eroded welfare state, working across disciplines has increasingly become a matter of financial necessity. In such circumstances, 'portfolio career' becomes but a glitzy euphemism for unpredictable work patterns. There is irony but greater realism in another recently coined phrase: 'gig economy'. This references long-used musicians' slang to describe the recent proliferation of short-term, temporary, and zero-hours contracts; a situation familiar for better or worse to large numbers of musicians, female and male, since long before the term 'Renaissance Man' was coined.

Of course Renaissance Woman – however brilliantly multiskilled – was assumed to be muse or mistress rather than master, so to speak. We women should reclaim the epithet: as I suspect large numbers merit it, not just as experts – polymaths, even – working across numerous professional fields, but as experts in managing that work alongside domestic demands. Yet far too many freelancers are constantly exhorted to take on work – whether it be to write a piece of music or a review, or to deliver a pre-concert talk – for very little or no remuneration, nor even expenses.<sup>6</sup> While women in particular tend to be far too understanding when negotiating terms, it's

also clear that we are just as liable as men to be the ones touting unpaid projects.

Nonetheless, the benefits of freelance working can outweigh the drawbacks for women like myself, who tolerate the disadvantages in order to claim the freedom to pursue different disciplines that self-employment brings. And there is the satisfaction of knowing that, merely by existing, an independent, creative woman posits an ideological challenge to an androcentric, patriarchal culture. Make no mistake, it is immensely fulfilling – even exhilarating – to work across different musical spheres utilising very different skills. And that in itself can, I hope, be a positive force for change at a time when long-embedded binary thinking is being questioned, along with the familiar, crude, and outdated stereotypes on which it depends. Such stereotypes around gender are amongst the most pernicious, and often underlie so-called musical and artistic ‘traditions’.

Arts practitioners of all kinds need to be at the forefront of movements for reform, or risk the diminishment of the very arts they profess to love. Thanks to the work of enlightened music historians, performers, and promoters we are now coming to understand the immense loss not just women, but our entire culture has incurred over hundreds of years due to gender inequality and worse. Partial change has come for some, but far too slowly; the need to properly redress that inequality for present and future generations is now critical.

## Notes

1. My use of the gender terms women/men etc. includes trans women and men, who experience additional obstacles to equality, as do those from black and minority communities, people with disabilities, and more. I am white and able-bodied, which automatically confers certain privileges.
2. Soraya Chemaly, *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2018).
3. Shortly after graduating I succeeded in securing funding for the then-nascent organisation Women in Music, to create an office and administrator post.
4. Sean Coughlan and David Brown, ‘Inequality Driving Deaths of Despair’, BBC News (14 May 2019); available at [www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-48229037](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-48229037) (accessed 11 December 2020).
5. Pamela Duncan, Niamh McIntyre, and Caroline Davies, ‘Gender Pay Gap Figures Show Eight in 10 UK Firms Pay Men More Than Women’, *The*

*Guardian* (4 April 2019); [www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/04/gender-pay-gap-figures-show-eight-in-10-uk-firms-pay-men-more-than-women](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/04/gender-pay-gap-figures-show-eight-in-10-uk-firms-pay-men-more-than-women) (accessed 5 December 2020).

6. As is typical in academic publishing, my contribution to this volume is unpaid in cash terms, though Cambridge University Press are unusual in providing £150 worth of their books (in addition to the more usual free copy of this book) to contributors. My hope is that ensuing debate will help effect much-needed reform in this arena.