

4 | Still Exceptional? Women in Composition Approaching the Twenty-First Century

ASTRID KVALBEIN

In December 2016 the curtain rose for Kaija Saariaho's *L'Amour de loin* (Love from afar, 2000, libretto by Amin Maalouf) at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. This was the first opera composed by a woman to be staged at the prestigious American opera house in 113 years, since Ethel Smyth's *Der Wald* in 1903. *L'Amour de loin*, which premiered at the Salzburg Festival in 2000, was, at the time, one of the most successful operas by a contemporary composer in the Western world, having already been performed in Paris, London, Toronto, Helsinki, and elsewhere. When the Met eventually staged it, it was regarded as a milestone, not only for female composers, but also for the institution's willingness to stage new works.

Saariaho (b.1952) has refined her vocal, orchestral, and electronic sound palette since her studies at IRCAM (Institute of Research and Coordination in Acoustics/Music) in the 1980s. As a student in Paris, as well as in Helsinki, Freiburg, and Darmstadt, Saariaho was very often the only young woman, and she fought to find the confidence to compose in an environment lacking female role models. But she persisted.¹ In interviews on the occasion of the premiere of *L'Amour de loin* at the Met, Saariaho was asked to comment on the apparent lack of female composers in the operatic world. On US National Radio, she responded that: 'It's kind of ridiculous . . . I feel that we should speak about my music and not of me being a woman'. However, Saariaho also observed young women battling the same barriers as she did more than thirty years earlier: 'Maybe we, then, should speak about it, even if it seems so unbelievable . . . You know, half of humanity has something to say, also.'²

After *L'Amour de loin*, Saariaho continued the collaboration with Maalouf. The oratorio *La Passion de Simone* (2006) is based on the writings of the philosopher and left-wing activist Simone Weil (1909–43), while the opera *Adriana Mater* (2005) tells the story of a woman who is raped and becomes pregnant during a cruel war, and *Emilie* (2008) explores the character of the passionate and intelligent noblewoman and scientist Émilie du Châtelet (1706–49). Two decades into the twenty-first century, from her position as one of the most successful composers of her

generation, Saariaho seems more politically engaged in her operas than ever before, often explicitly taking a woman's point of view.³

As a visiting professor she is also a sought-after role model for students at universities and conservatoires throughout the USA and Europe. Although women are still a minority in such positions, the numbers are increasing. Composing women also stand out as exceptional in terms of originality, reputation, and quality, and receive prestigious prizes, commissions, and other tokens of recognition. In this chapter a selected few of them will be introduced – from across the globe but, because of the author's background, with some prominence given to examples from north-western Europe – in an attempt to draw an outline of the situation at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

To begin with, emphasis is placed on opera and music drama, in particular works that highlight social and political issues, including gender. Other topics include how women composers and their works are present in a globalised world, how new musical 'ecosystems' are explored in the face of an emerging climate crisis, and how new aesthetics find their way into different venues, from traditional concert halls and opera houses to old and new avant-garde festivals.

Socially Engaged Opera and Music Drama

Concerns for social and political issues come to the fore in a range of operas at the beginning of the twenty-first century. For British composer Judith Weir (b.1954), who wrote her first opera in her mid-twenties, music drama has provided fertile ground for experimentation since *King Harald's Saga* (1979), a ten-minute, one-woman show involving eight acting roles, including St. Olaf, an Icelandic sage, and the Norwegian army. Her catalogue includes a range of instrumental and vocal works in which the composer combines musical 'storytelling' with the subtle utilisation of folk music, drawing on her Scottish heritage, such as bagpipe practices of the Scottish Highlands, and, in the opera *The Vanishing Bridegroom* (1990), Gaelic songs. She has brought in elements of Chinese opera and placed material from older Western art music in new settings. Weir is a highly respected composer, and in 2015 she became the first woman to be appointed Master of the Queen's Music, succeeding Peter Maxwell Davis (1934–2016) after a succession of twenty male musicians and composers. Her most recent opera *Miss Fortune* (2011) sets the story of a Sicilian folktale *Sfortuna* (Misfortune) in a modern context: the main character

falls victim to the financial crisis and lives a miserable life, constrained to a sweatshop and surrounded by urban riots.⁴ This production, for which Weir wrote the libretto herself, seems to represent, as in the case of Saariaho, a recent move towards addressing current societal issues more explicitly.

Austrian composer Olga Neuwirth (b.1968) has always used music drama as a vehicle for social critique. She started working with author, playwright, and 2004 Nobel Literature Prize laureate Elfriede Jelinek (b.1946) in her twenties, and the collaboration has stirred up both enthusiasm and controversy. Neuwirth has set to music the topics that Jelinek has dealt with throughout her career: totalitarianism, fascism, and dysfunctional families in bourgeoisie cultures, some of which are exposed in the renowned novel *The Piano Teacher* (*Die Klavierspielerin*, 1983, which was adapted into the French-language film *La Pianiste* by Michael Haneke in 2001).

Neuwirth and Jelinek's opera *Bärlamms Fest*, which premiered at the Wiener Festwochen in 1999, was recognised as an imaginative take on a 'perverted family dynasty', based on a surrealist drama by Leonora Carrington.⁵ The two also collaborated on an opera based on the TV and film director David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (2003), which includes pre-recorded material in which images, film, and electronic soundtracks play important roles. A third opera was commissioned by the Salzburg Festival and Paris National Opera for the Mozart Anniversary in 2006, but *Der Fall Hans W.* – which in its first version was set in a Second World War euthanasia clinic for children, but later took as its subject a recently convicted murderer and child molester – was first postponed, and eventually rejected. The commissioners argued that the quality of the libretto was inferior and the topic of paedophilia already exhausted. The incident led Jelinek to declare that she would never write an opera libretto again.⁶

Neuwirth, meanwhile, has kept on writing for stage as well as instrumental music. Her compositional palette is inspired by continental modernists such as Luigi Nono, Hans Werner Henze, and Adriana Hölzsky, and she often designs lively patchworks of quotes, samples, and references from a range of sources. The trumpet concerto . . . *miramondo multiplo* . . . (2006) references, amongst others, Gustav Mahler, Miles Davis, and Igor Stravinsky. The opera *American Lulu* (2012) is a jazzed-up version of Alban Berg's work, set in the American South, and aims to interpret Lulu's story from a female perspective. *The Outcasts* (2009–11), a tribute to Moby Dick's creator Herman Melville, holds a different take on gender issues: here Ishmael is depicted as a woman. *Orlando* (2019),

based on Virginia Woolf's novel, portrays a poet who changes sex from male to female. This was the first opera ever to be commissioned by the Vienna State Opera from a female composer. The lush score, with references 'from Elizabethan vocal polyphony to post-punk assault' impressed the critics,⁷ as did the adaptation of Woolf's novel in Act One. But Act Two, which brought in issues from the Holocaust up to 2019 was deemed, by many, too 'overcrowded' with ideas.⁸

While a marginal, if increasing, number of operas by contemporary women composers are being mounted on the main stages of the grand opera houses, new music often finds its way to alternative venues. For instance, Tansy Davies' (b.1973) *Between Worlds* (2014) – which commemorates the events of 9/11 – was commissioned by the English National Opera, but produced at a smaller, more flexible stage at the Barbican Centre. Davies' and writer Nick Drake's second opera *Cave* (2018) was staged by the Royal Opera in an abandoned industrial warehouse. The drama, set in a cave where a man searches for his daughter after an environmental disaster, comprised only two singers and a small ensemble, in addition to electronics.

Political issues appear in many chamber operas in the early 2000s. The last words of men sentenced to death make up the libretto of *Dead Beat Escapement* (2008) by the Norwegian Cecilie Ore (b.1954), and her *Adam & Eve – a Divine Comedy* (2015) depicts violence against women in the name of religion. Consequences of racism are highlighted in *Jean-Joseph* (2015) by Swedish composer Tebogo Monnakgotla (b.1972), which tells the story of the Madagascan poet Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo who committed suicide when rejected from attending the world exhibition in Paris in 1937, while Finnish composer Lotta Wennäkoski's (b.1970) monodrama *Lelele* (2010–11) quotes documentary reports about trafficking and forced prostitution.

Apparently, many composers put gender issues on the agenda with increasing intensity after having gained a certain professional reputation. For Wennäkoski's part it started with the more light-hearted *Life and Love of a Woman* (2002–03), in which new poetry on motherhood is set to music in dialogue with Robert Schumann's famous cycle *Frauenliebe und Leben* (1841). In contrast to the idealised world of the nineteenth-century songs, Wennäkoski's music – shifting between atonal phrases, sounds, and quotes from many genres – is set to poems about everyday exhaustion and mess, the ovum waiting for the moment in which it will drop, and animal-like maternal instincts.

Whether or not thematising parenthood is a feminist strategy or merely an exposure of human experience, several new works are set in the

domestic sphere – which has traditionally been considered feminine. Amongst them are *Emil* (2001) for solo voice by Carola Bauckholt (b.1959), which imitates a baby's babbling, and the subsequent *Emil will nicht schlafen* (Emil doesn't want to sleep, 2010) for singer and ensemble, in which the German composer mixes theatrical elements and playful composing with sound in a characteristic manner. A personal account of the effects of motherhood on composing is also provided by electroacoustic composer Manuella Blackburn in 'In Her Own Words 3'.

Women Composers in a Globalised World

A different conception of playfulness is staged in *Alice in Wonderland* by Berlin-based South Korean composer Unsuik Chin (b.1961), which premiered at the Bavarian State Opera in 2007. The opera depicts a dream-like, partly grotesque, version of Lewis Carroll's tale. Like Saariaho, Chin holds a special interest in the female voice and in the blending of electronic and acoustic sounds. Chin's breakthrough work, the *Akrostichon-Wortspiel* (1991/1993), is a vocally acrobatic piece for high soprano and ensemble that comprises seven scenes from fairy tales in which the words are used as much as tools for playing with sounds as to tell a story. Her output is carnivalesque in its rapid shifts between modernist soundscapes and references to jazz and other genres. The influence of Chin's teacher György Ligeti is evident, as are the skills acquired in the electronic music studios in Berlin and Paris (IRCAM).

Chin, who moved from Seoul to Hamburg to study in the mid-1980s, has been a prominent figure on the contemporary music scenes of Europe. Her works, such as *Double Bind* (2007) for solo violin and electronics, have been performed by a range of renowned soloists and ensembles. Influences from her native East Asian region have been scarce, as she has feared that her music might be conceived as exotic; that is, considered to be attractive due to its colourfulness and strangeness in relation to dominant Western idioms. But she did eventually compose a concerto, *Šu*, in 2009, for Wu Wei, a virtuoso on the Chinese mouth organ, the sheng.⁹ However, the concerto does not cite traditional music from either China or Korea, and it is only one in a series including cello, clarinet, and piano concertos with Western symphony or chamber orchestras.

In an increasingly globalised world, elements from different native and national cultures find their way into contemporary music in a variety of styles and forms. While some composers, such as Chin, are sceptical of the

threat of exoticism, others draw more willingly on the resources of musical multiculturalism. For Gabriela Lena Frank (b.1972) – born in California to Chinese-Peruvian and Lithuanian-Jewish parents – exploring her mixed ancestry has been crucial. She has conducted close-up studies of Andean music in particular, and her work titles display her South American influences: *Leyendas* (Legends, for string orchestra, 2001), *La Llorona* (The crying woman; tone poem for viola and ensemble, 2007), and an opera on the relationship between two iconic Mexican artists, *El último sueño de Frida y Diego* (The last dream of Frida [Kahlo] and Diego [Rivera]), commissioned for the Fort Worth Opera in 2021. Frank has also composed for indigenous instruments in *Compadre Huashayo* (2012).

Her practice, which also involves community work and running her own creative academy of music encouraging young female composers in particular, has been described as a kind of musical anthropology.¹⁰ Frank herself states that her approach is typically American: ‘We bring in a lot of cultures, eat it up and make it into something new’.¹¹ The composer nevertheless calls herself ‘old-fashioned’ in the sense that she primarily writes for acoustic instruments and traditional classical formats, and is inspired by earlier twentieth-century composers who mixed new music with old folkloristic elements, such as Béla Bartók and Alberto Ginastera.

Eastern European traditions are also vital to Roxanna Panufnik, daughter of composer Andrzej Panufnik, who fled to Britain from Poland in the 1950s. But her spiritual interests imply utilising sources from a greater world, in works comprising elements from Byzantine and Western chant, Jewish shofar, Islamic calls to prayer, Spanish Sephardic music, and Greek bouzouki scales. Her *Unending Love* (2017), based on a poem by Rabindranath Tagore, is scored for double choir, Carnatic singer, and various Indian instruments.

Regardless of geographical points of connection, Panufnik’s and Frank’s tonal languages are fundamentally harmonic. Liza Lim (b.1966), who grew up in Brunei and Australia with Chinese parents, and who also integrates elements from various cultures in her works, resides on the more experimental side. Like Chin, she holds a strong position within the Western avant-garde. Lim is an advocate for transculturalism: the idea that certain phenomena – such as time, beauty, and nature – might transcend cultural differences by deep, ecological connections. In a programme note on her 2016 work *How Forests Think* for sheng and ensemble, she compares the forms with plants ‘growing toward light and water; like mycelial strands entwining with tree roots in a co-evolving internet of plant-life’.¹² Transcultural and ecological ideas, Lim states, ‘have enabled me to think

about composition as a way of populating musical spaces with “creatures” rather than structural forms’.¹³ In her creating, she states, (human) musicians and (non-human) musical instruments join ‘fictional composites of plants, animals, elements, spirits and all kinds of cultural ideas’ in a speculative play, resulting in something that is hard to define in standard musicological terms.¹⁴ Lim is thus not merely an advocate for multi- or transculturalism. She also searches for new models by which one can understand forms and structures by looking away from traditional Western musicology and turning towards indigenous cultures, as well as ecosystems at work in nature.

New Ecosystems in Music

Nature, in details and vast landscapes, has been a source of inspiration for artists of all times. But at the start of the twenty-first century the threat of an environmental crisis has made it a particularly urgent topic. At the same time, new technologies have been driving forces in the development of contemporary soundscapes. British-Norwegian Natasha Barrett (b.1972), who grew up amongst her father’s vinyl albums of Claude Debussy’s music and the evolving synthesiser technology of the 1980s,¹⁵ was awarded the 2006 Nordic Council Music Prize for . . . *fetters* . . . (2002), which is inspired by microsystems in nature; the physical laws for the motions of molecules in a limited space whose energy eventually makes the space explode into a new space. Barrett, a leading composer and researcher within electronic music, has since developed advanced techniques for three-dimensional acousmatic soundscapes, with precise renderings of recorded sounds and artistic ideas alike.

Many composers utilise new technology to enhance our ability to listen to our environment, such as sound artist Jana Winderen (b.1965), who is fascinated by the interplay between human artefacts, technology, and nature. A recurring element in her works is recordings from the Arctic regions both above and below water, of whale song and what disturbs it: noise from cruise ships and seismic blasting. In the composition *Classified* (2017), commissioned by the Borealis Festival, such material was conveyed by way of multiple loudspeakers in a huge storage building for fishing equipment in Bergen.

Music from the Nordic region risks becoming trapped in its own brand of exoticism in the sense that listeners ‘hear’ cold or Arctic landscapes in it, whether intended or not on the part of the composer. Icelandic Anna

Thorvaldsdottir (b.1977) often points to the wild and barren nature of her home country as a source of inspiration and her music is promoted as ‘an ecosystem of sounds, where materials continuously grow in and out of each other’ in continuous processes of growth and transformation.¹⁶ But, although she brings in ideas and material from nature, she emphasises their abstract and technical qualities in the compositional process. For instance, Thorvaldsdottir thematises time, texture, and motion in *Aion* and *Dreaming* for symphony orchestra, and in chamber works such as *In the Light of Air* (2013/2014) and *Fields* (2016), as well as in the chamber opera *UR* (2015). The inspiration from nature is not to be taken too literally. She has stated that: ‘when I am inspired by a particular element that I perceive in nature, it is because I perceive it as musically interesting’.¹⁷ Nature thus inspires sound worlds, from electroacoustic and site-specific compositions to meditative, orchestral landscapes, and, in the case of Japanese-American composer Karen Tanaka (b.1961), poetic, minimalist pieces with titles such as *Water and Stone*, *Silent Ocean*, *Tales of Trees*, and *Crystalline*, combining sophistication and simplicity in an accessible musical language.

Reaching Out for Broader Audiences

The different currents in the field of contemporary music reach different audiences, some larger than others. On the one hand, new works are presented at forums and festivals for cutting-edge experimental repertoire – such as in Donaueschingen, Darmstadt, and Huddersfield. On the other hand, composers collaborate with the established institutions and have their works performed in the concert halls of symphony orchestras as well as in chamber music series and at festivals all over the world. One of the most successful composers in the realms of traditionally oriented symphonic music is the American Jennifer Higdon (b.1962). Her *Blue Cathedral* has been performed hundreds of times since its premiere in 2000.

Higdon is an eager communicator both in her collaborations with performers and in relation to audiences. She often gives interviews and pre-concert talks, and she provides the listeners with programme notes that give an insight into the stories behind the music. *Blue Cathedral*, for instance, was written in memory of her late brother, and she imagined the cathedral as a place for ‘beginnings, endings, solitude, fellowship, contemplation, knowledge and growth’. Here she ‘saw the image of clouds and blueness

permeating from the outside' and imagined the listener entering 'from the back of the sanctuary, floating along the corridor among giant crystal pillars'.¹⁸

Higdon's music bears witness to inspiration from film and popular music, and her *Violin Concerto* has been described as a 'showpiece' in which 'chromatic neo-Romanticism and inventive orchestration keep the piece lively and surprising'.¹⁹ The concerto, which was written for Hilary Hahn, was awarded the 2010 Pulitzer Prize the year it premiered, with the prize committee calling it 'a deeply engaging piece that combines flowing lyricism with dazzling virtuosity'.²⁰

Communication, musical craftsmanship, and emotional intensity are also at the heart of the works of Augusta Read Thomas (b.1964). A professor of composition at the University of Chicago and a sought-after, prolific composer, she draws on influences from Bach via Mahler, Stravinsky, and Debussy to jazz.²¹ *Radiant Circles* (2010) evolves around the colours of the different instrument groups in the symphony orchestra in one twelve-minute-long crescendo with particularly virtuosic parts for trumpet and timpani. Her 2019 opera *Sweet Potato Kicks the Sun* has a quite different temperament, featuring the artist Nicole Paris in a key role beatboxing.²²

The musical life of the USA apparently provides a fertile environment for emotionally intensive, tonally rooted works in traditional formats, as well as for the blending in of elements from popular music. Amongst the younger generation, Missy Mazzoli (b.1980) mixes groovy sections with lyrical melodic lines and soft harmonies in a personal brew of a minimalist language. Her opera *Breaking the Waves*, based on Lars von Trier's film of the same name and premiered at Opera Philadelphia in 2016, was described as supporting the dynamic of the tragic story 'by wedding strong lyric invention to an unsettled, insidiously dissonant chamber-orchestra texture that evokes the jagged beauty both of [the Isle of] Skye and of Bess's inner landscape'.²³

Symphony orchestras and opera houses can be uneasy partners for contemporary composers, given the history and the inherent expectations they carry with them. Sarah Kirkland Snider (b.1973) explains that when thinking about classical institutions and 'their values, their history',²⁴ it brings out something different than when she composes for musicians who are comfortable in both classical and popular music. Herself manoeuvring in what she calls 'the cracks between' these worlds, she stresses how individual performers are often crucial to the making of her music. Amongst them is Shara Worden, for whom she has composed the cycles *Penelope* and *Unremembered* for singer and orchestra.

Intimate collaborations between musicians and composers are, if not new in a historical perspective, characteristic for several contemporary music projects. At times the division between composer and performer is fully erased. Lera Auerbach (b.1973), who defected to the USA from the Soviet Union in 1991, has collaborated intimately with high-profile musicians such as the violinists Gideon Kremer and Leonidas Kavakos. But she also conducts and plays her own music on the piano. Her output is voluminous, passionate, often meditative, inspired by dreams and visions, and draws on input from classical sources from Beethoven to Shostakovich and Schoenberg. She is an outspoken advocate for tonality and writes mostly in traditional chamber, orchestral, and operatic formats, including her 2012 *Requiem (Dresden. An Ode to Peace)*. She is also a poet, painter, and sculptor.

Various forms of artistic multitasking are practised by many, including the younger composer-conductor Sara Caneva (b.1991). However, blurring the distinctions between composing and performing can involve more than just mastering different disciplines. It can also be considered an act of intervention in the norms inherent in the Western tradition since the romantic era, in particular in the tendency to give the composer's 'abstract' ideas and the authoritative score prominence over the physical practice of performance.

Challenging the Composer–Performer Division

In 2016, Jennifer Walshe (b.1974) presented a manifesto for a new school which she names The New Discipline.²⁵ Referring to historical avant-garde movements such as Dada and Fluxus, as well as contemporary colleagues, the Irish composer and singer promotes a practice in which she not only provides scores and instructions, but also takes part in the directing, choreographing, and performing of her works. The New Discipline appreciates 'composers being interested and willing to perform, to get their hands dirty, to do it themselves, do it immediately'.²⁶ Walshe's manifesto might be seen as a response to the critique musical modernism has encountered throughout the last century; of being too cerebral, too detached from sensuous pleasure and pain – that is, the body – and thus, perhaps, all the harder for women to relate to.²⁷

An outspoken feminist, Walshe has toured European contemporary music scenes with the chamber opera *XXX Live Nude Girls* (2003).²⁸ Performed by two female singers, an instrumental ensemble, and two

puppeteers, it is set in a doll's house inhabited by Barbie characters – projected on video screens – who experiment with sex in their otherwise rather miserable lives. For the 2019 project *Time Time* Walshe joined forces with philosopher Timothy Morton in exploring time in an ecological, astronomical, and bodily sense (such as ageing). 'We call it an opera, but it's not an opera in the conventional sense', Walshe stresses.²⁹ It deals with time as a phenomenon, but as much as that, it explores what might happen between a composer, free improvising musicians, and audiovisual elements in the moment, on stage.

Maja Ratkje (b.1973) also draws upon her resources as an improvising singer and noise musician, blending acoustically and electronically produced sound. The Norwegian composer launched her solo album *Voice* (2003) shortly after having collected prizes for the instrumental ensemble works *Waves I* and *Waves II* (both 1997). *Crepuscular Hour* (2010) was co-commissioned by the Huddersfield and Oslo Contemporary Music Festivals, and is scored for no fewer than six noise musicians, three choirs, and church organ. Ratkje also raises her voice about political issues and the environmental crisis in particular. She declines sponsorships from companies within the petroleum industry, and the orchestral work *§ 112* (2014) thematises a constitutional clause about the state's responsibility for the environment and the health of its citizens.

Societal issues are also brought to the fore by Chinese composer, multi-instrumentalist, and performance artist Du Yun (b.1977). When awarded the 2017 Pulitzer Prize, her opera *Angel's Bone* (libretto by Royce Vavrek) was reviewed as a work 'that integrates vocal and instrumental elements and a wide range of styles into a harrowing allegory for human trafficking in the modern world'.³⁰ In the 2019 concert project *Where We Lost Our Shadows*, Du collaborated with film-maker Khaled Jarrar in depicting the challenges of migration and the refugee crisis. The work zooms in on individual faces on screen and individual musicians on stage; vocalists using extended techniques, soloists in music from East Asia and the Middle East, and musicians in a European contemporary music ensemble. Crossover is characteristic for Du Yun, who is likely to offer a concert with her pop art band Ok Miss on the same night as works such as *Where We Lost Our Shadows*.

Walshe, Ratkje, and Du Yun are all composers who 'get their hands dirty' by performing and improvising and by loosening their artistic control through letting others experiment with their material, often in collaborative practices. They also operate, alongside artists such as Juliana Hodkinson (b.1973) and Mirela Ivičević (b.1980), in environments where

utilising and developing new technology is customary, and where the distinctions between opera, music drama, performance, sound art, composition, and improvisation are continuously challenged. Such creative spaces seem to hold a potential for composers with ambivalent feelings towards the established musical institutions, and their inherent conventions and traditions, in which the somewhat distant male composer of scores is still the norm. However, this does not imply that avant-garde and new music arenas are exemplary in terms of gender balance.

Avant-Garde Activism and Optimism

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, several measures were taken to promote women composers of the past and present, such as the PRS Foundation's 50:50 Keychange campaign, as discussed in Chapter 16, 'Women in the Music Industries: The Art of Juggling'. In contemporary music one important initiative emerged at the Darmstadt summer course and festival in 2016. The American composer Ashley Fure (b.1982) presented statistics showing a significant gender imbalance at the festival, which alongside the one in Donaueschingen has been a defining force in continental modernism since the later 1940s. Subsequent discussions concluded that more action was required and led to the founding of the Gender Relations network in Darmstadt (GRiD), which soon expanded its scope to Gender Relations in New Music (GRiNM).³¹

The statistics revealed that the average percentage of female composers in Darmstadt in the years 1946 to 2014 was only seven, rising to around eighteen when counting from 1990 to 2014. Moreover, the most frequently performed male composers had their works programmed about four times as often as the top ten female composers.³² Amongst the most performed women composers were Olga Neuwirth, Kaija Saariaho, Jennifer Walshe, and Liza Lim. Also on the list are prominent names such as Younggi Pagh-Paan (b.1945), Chaya Czernowin (b.1957), Isabel Mundry (b.1963), and Misato Mochizuki (b.1969). The youngest is Swedish Malin Bång (b.1974), whose music often involves acoustical objects in addition to traditional instruments, bearing witness to an affinity for intimate sounds and noises, at times very quiet, although laid out in contrast to more dramatic, abrupt gestures. Bång can be said to be developing and refining continental post-Second-World-War Modernist aesthetics, as defined by composers such as Helmut Lachenmann, Wolfgang Rihm, and subsequently Rebecca Saunders (b.1967).

Saunders – British-born, but based in Berlin, and also on the Darmstadt top ten list – typically composes with the ‘shadows’ and noises of the sounds of instruments, as much as with the sonorous timbres idealised in the romantic era. The Ernst von Siemens Music Prize was awarded to her in 2019 for ‘an oeuvre which leaves its visible and meaningful mark on contemporary music history through its astonishingly nuanced attention to timbre, and her distinctive and intensely striking sonic language’.³³ On this occasion, Saunders was the first woman to be awarded the main prize for composition. Only a few other women had won the lesser composers’ prize, and violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter the main prize, in 2008, for her musicianship. Saunders, whose music had been performed regularly at the most prestigious contemporary music festivals in Europe, called it ‘tragic’ that her gender thus made headlines in 2019. But she also found it ‘understandable’ considering the many women in her generation who had not pursued their careers as composers. She did, however, also observe a ‘wealth of very talented, strong, confident female composers who are at last being publicly recognised and becoming increasingly visible’.³⁴

Two decades into the twenty-first century, women composers are still exceptional, to an extent that spurs timely activism. But there is also a sense of optimism in the field. Although not representative in numbers, the female ‘half of humanity’ – to quote Saariaho again – demonstrates that it has ‘something to say’ by being ‘all over the place’ with artistic outputs in a wide variety of styles, genres, forms, and formats. The composers discussed in this chapter relate to the issue of being female in a male-dominated profession in very different ways, some uttering fierce critique of suppressive systems, others claiming that they do not have to address the issue at all. But whether they thematise it or not, they all contribute to change by being heard and seen; at concerts and festivals, in clubs, opera houses, and orchestral venues, and not least, streamed through an infinite number of digital channels.

Notes

1. Pirkko Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).
2. Jeff Lunden, “Half of Humanity Has Something to Say”: Composer Kaija Saariaho on Her Met Debut’, *NPR* (3 December 2016), available at www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2016/12/03/503986298/half-of-humanity-has-something-to-say-composer-kaija-saariaho-on-her-met-debut (accessed 5 November 2019).

3. See <https://saariaho.org/works/> (accessed 5 November 2019).
4. Fiona Maddocks, 'Miss Fortune – Review', *The Guardian* (18 March 2012), available at www.theguardian.com/music/2012/mar/18/miss-fortune-opera-house-review (accessed 5 November 2019).
5. Barbara Basting, 'Drastische Töne: Die Komponistin Olga Neuwirth und ihre Zusammenarbeit mit Elfriede Jelinek', *Du: Die Zeitschrift der Kultur*, 59 (1999–2000), 22–5.
6. Anonymous, 'Jelinek-Neuwirth-Oper zum "Fall Wurst" abermals vor dem Scheitern', *NEWS* (30 June 2004), www.news.at/a/news-jelinek-neuwirth-oper-fall-wurst-scheitern-85710 (accessed 5 November 2019); Anonymous, 'Holender lehnt Produktion von Jelinek-Libretto ab', *Der Standard* (20 October 2004), available at www.derstandard.at/story/1831725/holender-lehnt-produktion-von-jelinek-libretto-ab (accessed 27 March 2020).
7. Alex Ross, 'Opera Against the Patriarchy', *The New Yorker* (6 January 2020), available at www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/01/06/opera-against-the-patriarchy (accessed 1 April 2020).
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