



WOMEN MAKING MUSIC

The
Western Art Tradition,
1150–1950



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Passed Away Is the Piano Girl:
Changes in American Musical Life,
1870–1900

JUDITH TICK

In 1904 James Huneker, noted critic and music journalist, sounded the death of a nineteenth-century stereotype, whom he called the “piano girl”:

Passed away is the girl who played the piano in the stiff Victorian drawing rooms of our mothers. It has always seemed to me that slippery hair-cloth sofas and the “Battle of Prague” dwelt in mutual harmony. And now at the beginning of the century the girls who devote time to the keyboard merely for the purpose of social display are almost as rare as the lavender water ladies of morbid sensibilities in the Richardson and Fielding novels. . . . I wonder if the musical girl of the old sort may not also set down for study—the study we accord to rare and disappearing types. Yet never has America been so musical. . . . Here is a pretty paradox: the piano is passing and with it the piano girl—there really was a piano girl—and more music was never made before in the land!¹

However lovingly she had been portrayed in genre paintings or popular illustrations of the early nineteenth-century artists, in the literary world of music criticism and in the polemical world of cultural feminism she was the archsymbol of the dilettante. According to Huneker, she had been replaced by the “new girl”:

The piano girl was forced to practice at the keyboard, even if without talent. Every girl played the piano, not to play was a stigma of poverty. The new girl is too busy to play the piano unless she has the gift; then she plays with consuming earnestness. We listen to her, for we know that this is an age of specialization, an age when woman is coming into her own, be it nursing, electoral suffrage, or the writing of plays; so our poets no longer make sonnets to our Ladies of Ivories, nor are budding girls chained to the keyboard.²

There is an earnestness that marks all self-conscious periods of change. Because we know that many people continue to practice without talent and that, even yet, girls are more likely to take piano lessons than are boys, it is difficult to believe in the demise of the piano girl entirely. But that level of human truth need not obscure the real issue of social and economic change. For women musicians, the late nineteenth century, particularly the 1890s, was one such period.

Whereas in 1870 women played the piano, harp, or guitar for the most part, by 1900 there were professional violinists and professional all-women orchestras. In 1870 women composers wrote parlor songs; even fewer wrote parlor piano music. By 1900 there had been premieres of concertos and a symphony by American women.

The change involved more than numbers. From a sociological viewpoint, instrumental performance and composition can be seen as occupations whose sexual definitions were in transition as well: they were no longer exclusively sex-typed as male.³ The concept of occupational sex-typing, therefore, includes cultural values and beliefs that justify sexual distribution on normative grounds. Thus rationalizations of the division of labor within music that had previously excluded women from professional musicianship were also affected by changes in the definition of women's work.

Census data between 1870 and 1900 document this trend. As table 4 indicates, the percentage of women employed in music between those years rose dramatically from 36 percent to 56.4 percent. Music was, according to the 1900 census, one of the professions whose sex distribution altered most between 1880 and 1900.

Because the census after 1870 does not distinguish between musician and music teacher, we can only infer the distribution of employment increase from other kinds of evidence. It seems likely, however, that women were heavily represented within music teaching. In 1870, for example, women constituted only 2 percent of the professional musicians but 60 percent of the teachers. In 1897 the president of the Music Teachers National Association estimated that half the membership was female.⁴ Many music teachers outside of the big cities did not belong to the association but were tallied in the census data. They were invariably women.

As teaching became increasingly competitive, the shortage of work also stimulated women into expanding their occupational ambitions within music. Caroline Nichols, the conductor of a celebrated female orchestra in the 1890s, cited unemployment and the

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Table 4
Women in Music and Music Teaching, 1870–1910
Percent Female

| | 1870 | 1880 | 1890 | 1900 | 1910 |
|------------------------------|-----------------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|
| Musicians | 2 (6,519)** | * | * | * | * |
| Music teachers | 60 (9,491)** | * | * | * | * |
| Total | 36 | 43 | 55 | 56.4 | 66 |
| Total employed in profession | (16,010)** | (30,477) | (62,155) | (92,174) | (139,310) |

*Not available. After 1870 the census does not distinguish between music and music teaching.

**Numbers in parentheses indicate total number of males and females in the occupation.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Reports, 1870–1910.

oversupply of teachers as the major motivation behind her work.⁵ Similarly, Camilla Urso, the famous violinist, demanded that women be admitted to theater orchestras for reasons of livelihood. In a paper delivered before the Women's Musical Congress at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, Urso cited the "many hundred good female violinists who are now without work." Five years later, in a letter to the *Musical Courier*, Urso reiterated her position that women should be admitted to orchestras on an equal footing with men: "Let my sisters agitate this question and assert their rights. It will in time benefit women with scanty means who have spent their time and money, when now men alone profit."⁶

The mere existence of large numbers of professional female violinists, in or out of work, marked a significant change from the past. Tradition decreed that the piano, harp, and guitar were the appropriate feminine instruments.⁷ They were instruments for domestic entertainment and required no facial exertions or body movements that interfered with the portrait of grace the lady musician was to emanate. Scanty evidence reassures us that such strictures were not regarded as natural laws. We know of a female seminary (or girls' school) in Madison, Georgia, that dared to teach its young pupils

string instruments in the 1850s.⁸ The activities of all-women brass bands were reported in local newspapers; and a female cornet player became famous in the 1870s, as also did a female saxophonist in the 1890s.⁹ But, by and large, women did not learn orchestral instruments to any significant degree until the 1870s, and here change was focused on string instruments rather than on winds or brass.

By 1900 the violin had become an accepted instrument for women. In an article on "Woman as a Violinist" (March 1882), the editor of the *Musical World* commented on the changing attitudes. As a vernacular instrument, the "fiddle" was "accused of evil influences"; as a cultivated instrument, it lost its lower-class connotations and was respectable enough for women to play. The climate of opinion changed for a number of reasons. For one thing, two women became famous concert violinists during the 1870s and 1880s. Both Maud Powell and Camilla Urso established precedents for other women and advocated equal opportunities for women instrumentalists.¹⁰

Another factor was the influence of Julius Eichberg, the founder of the Boston Conservatory of Music. Eichberg, who taught both male and female pupils to play the violin, received considerable publicity from recitals at which his female pupils performed.¹¹ In an article on "Lady Violinists" for *Town and Country* (April 1879), Eichberg wrote, "We gladly espouse the cause of women's right to play upon all the instruments of the orchestra." By the 1880s Eichberg's female pupils had formed the Eichberg Ladies String Quartette and the Eichberg String Orchestra, giving concerts in New York as well as Boston.

The friendly press Eichberg received reflected civic pride in the establishment of musical groups that enhanced Boston's leadership in the cultivated tradition, as well as the relative ease with which prejudice against women playing string instruments was altered. For example, on 20 January 1888, the *Boston Herald* published an article on "Girl Violinists: An Innovation That Has Been Followed by Good Results," which included the following:

At the present time nothing is more common than to see upon the streets of our towns and cities, and especially in Boston, girls carrying jauntily a violin case. . . .

Twenty-five years ago, a girl appearing upon frequented streets with such a burden would have been subjected to much staring and muttered comment . . . if not downright persecution. But a good many things may happen within 25 years, and under the modern view of things girls may aspire to almost any attainment of which humanity is capable. The girl of today will

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astonish no one, even if she carries about the cornet or trombone, as well as the violin. . . .

The change in situation is due to Julius Eichberg. . . . He declares that girls are in every respect the equal of boys. And thus it happened that in his department of musical teaching and performance, as in so many others, Boston long since took the lead, and today representatives of her violinists of the "softer sex" astonish audiences.

At a concert given in New York by the Eichberg Ladies String Quartette the critic for the *Musical Review* (1 January 1880) acknowledged that a "regular string quartette of ladies is an unusual phenomenon: Boston really has something we can not match."

But female musicians in New York were turning their marginal status in the musical world to advantage by organizing "lady orchestras." While Eichberg was teaching young Bostonian ladies, New Yorkers were patronizing female musicians in the theatres and music halls. Lady orchestras became popular attractions in New York during the 1870s. Their model was probably the Vienna Damen Orchestra, led by Josephine Weinlich, which performed in the United States in 1871.¹² They originated as a feature of German-American life in the city, most of them playing the German music halls in lower Manhattan, such as the Volksgarten and the Atlantic Garden. The musicians in the 1870s were typically German, and the earliest such groups are listed by Odell, in his *Chronicles of the New York Stage*, as "Damen Orchesters."

Lady orchestras were a standard feature of New York entertainment for the rest of the century (see table 5). Like the female minstrel troupes, they exploited the prejudice that made them oddities, since the curiosity value of women playing cornets or double basses could attract audiences on that basis alone. Indeed, so important were their reputations as all-female troupes that if a musician were needed and a woman could not be found, then a man would dress as a woman in order to substitute.¹³

The most famous local lady orchestra in New York was the Ladies' Elite at the Atlantic Garden, a feature there for over thirty-five years.¹⁴ In the 1880s the troupe was managed by Charles Eschert, xylophonist and general musician about town. As a manager of a musical bureau, Eschert capitalized on the popularity of the group by advertising "lady orchestras" as his specialty, available for "concerts, private entertainments, dinners, and parties."¹⁵ The size and repertory of the Ladies' Elite varied over the years. The songwriter Ed Marks recalled in his memoirs a cornetist, bass player, and drum-

Table 5
Lady Orchestras in New York and Boston

| | |
|---------|--|
| 1871 | Vienna Damen Orchester |
| 1873 | Damen-Orchester (Bowery Garden) |
| 1879 | Berlin Lady Orchestra (Tivoli Garden) |
| 1880-81 | Marie Roller's "Elite Kapelle" (Atlantic Garden) Carl Eschert's Ladies' Elite (Atlantic Garden) |
| 1882 | The Ladies' Philharmony (Koster and Bial's Concert Hall) Marie Roller's Damen Orchester California Damen Orchester (Volksgarten) |
| 1888 | Ladies' Amateur Orchestra (Lyceum Theater) Boston Fadette Lady Orchestra |
| 1891 | Ladies Schubert Quartette |
| 1891-92 | Blanche Walters's Damen-Orchester (Volksgarten) |
| 1891 | Marion Osgood's Ladies Orchestra of Boston (YMCA Hall, Brooklyn) |
| 1892 | Eschert's Ladies Elite (Atlantic Garden) |
| 1894 | New York Ladies Orchestra |
| 1896 | Women's String Orchestra of New York |
| 1898 | Women's String Quartette of New York |

SOURCE: Mainly George Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*, 10 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927-31).

mer playing *Daisy, Daisy* in the 1890s.¹⁶ But the orchestra numbers interspersed between the vaudeville acts could also include Johann Strauss and Meyerbeer.¹⁷

Only in this special capacity were female instrumentalists tolerated by the more conservative elements of the musical establishment. In 1895 the *Musical Courier* noted that "with a *light repertoire*, no traveling to do and no arduous rehearsals, they [all-women orchestras] might make a success as a unique feature in social engagements."¹⁸ The idea that women ought to play only the light repertoire was simply a further elaboration of prejudice. Consequently, any occasion that demonstrated woman's ability to play the best of the cultivated tradition was celebrated as proof of her musical equality. One such concert was held in conjunction with the Columbian Exposition. A publication of the suffrage movement reported it with great pleasure:

Women as players and composers are coming into prominence in musical festivals and on great public occasions. A grand orchestra of 65 women players is to take part in the concerts of the Columbian festival to be given in

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Boston on May 4, 5, 6, & 7. . . . So far as is known, this will be the first festival event of such magnitude in which women players have been given such prominence. The orchestra is to perform in conjunction with a great Sousa band the same compositions played by the N.Y. Symphony Orchestra and the Sousa band at the Carnegie Music Hall, April 16, i.e., Meyerbeer's *Torchlight Dance* and . . . the "Battle Hymn" from Wagner's "Rienzi," and the "Gathering of the Armies" from "Lohengrin". . . . The thanks of all women are due to Manager D. Blakely for this recognition of women as orchestral players in the higher class of compositions.¹⁹

By 1900 a number of reputable female orchestras and string quartets were playing the "higher class of compositions," among them the New York Women's String Orchestra and the Schubert Quartette of Boston. The most famous women's group, the Boston Fadette Orchestra, was organized in 1888. Unlike the Ladies' Elite, the Fadettes were not attached to a local theatre but became a major entertainment attraction with a national reputation. The Fadettes were organized by a pioneer woman conductor, Caroline Nichols. The original group of six expanded to twenty by 1898, when the vaudeville manager B. F. Keith booked them into his theatres all over the United States. Between 1890 and 1920 Nichols claimed that the Fadettes gave over 6,000 concerts, half of them as headliners in first-class vaudeville theatres.²⁰

In some ways the Fadettes were a hybrid form of entertainment. As a vaudeville act they had comic routines, such as that described by the vaudeville performer Joe Laurie: "They had a bit where the all-girl group got mad and walked out and Caroline replaced them, playing ten different instruments."²¹ The Fadettes naturally traveled in more polite society in Boston, where they were patronized by prominent people in the musical world, such as B. F. Lang and George Chickering. Their repertory showed equal diversity. Nichols describes it as "classical, standard, and popular." It included "many symphonies, all the classic overtures of 75 grand operas and numberless salon pieces of popular appeal as well as a complete collection of dramatic descriptive numbers which were used in the early silent moving pictures at Roxy's Theatre."²² The mixture of vaudeville routines with symphonies reflects the peculiar position of the female instrumentalist in an orchestral world defined as masculine. Since women were excluded from permanent city or theatre orchestras, the best option was the free-lance performing organization that required a flexible repertory for survival.

The entrance of women into the orchestral world thus reflects the ways in which occupational sex-typing used prejudice to support

economic discrimination. The prejudice against women instrumentalists and the expansion of their musical opportunities to include all instruments of the orchestra produced relatively little friction in the musical world until it was accompanied by the threat of economic competition. This threat was then met through the elaboration of social segregation.²³ The institution of lady orchestras simultaneously removed women from the open job market while it exploited their difference from the majority group. Just as black performers entered the entertainment world through genres that exploited racial stereotypes, women formed their own separate orchestras. They too got their start within vernacular rather than cultivated institutions. Therefore by 1900 orchestral performance modified its sex-typed connotations as a masculine field just enough to allow women room on the periphery.

What most female players wanted, however, was just what union discrimination denied them: the "strain of competition with men."²⁴ As one member of the Ladies' Elite Orchestra said:

If I had the chance to substitute for a man I should do so in a minute and should look for more and better opportunities to follow. By accepting them we women gain a foothold in the orchestra world, and that is what we are all ambitious for. Now we are limited to concert work or to musical organizations composed entirely of women. I am sure a great many of us could hold our own with the majority of men. . . .²⁵

Until 1904 the Musicians Union legally excluded women from playing in union controlled public orchestras. However, when the union became affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, it could no longer legally deny women membership. At that point, the union enrolled 4,500 members in New York City, thirty-one of them women. Ten of those women were members of the still surviving Ladies' Elite Orchestra at Atlantic Garden.

The change of policy was, of course, an inadvertent by-product of the new labor affiliation. It caught New York conductors by surprise and they reacted accordingly. The *Musical Standard* collected their reactions in an article entitled "Opinions of Some New York Leaders on Women as Orchestral Players." The consensus of opinion was negative, as most of those interviewed resurrected the nineteenth-century stereotype about feminine frailty—that women lacked the strength to play wind or brass instruments:

Women harpists are most desirable in an orchestra but as cornetists, clarinetists, flutists and the like, they are quite impossible, except in concert work.

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Women cannot possibly play brass instruments and look pretty, and why should they spoil their looks?²⁶

Women would derive only one real benefit from the new rules; they would now receive equal pay for equal work, whereas before "they had to take what was offered."

Lest any woman take offense at this low opinion of female musicians, one conductor of a theatre orchestra concluded his diatribe with gallantry: "Woman, lovely woman, is always to be admired, except when she is playing in an orchestra." Therefore, prejudice was simply the patina of belief glossing over the real fear of job competition. As the conductor of the Metropolitan Orchestra commented: "In a little while men will wake up to find that they are closely and successfully being pushed in one more sphere by the fair sex . . . fewer and fewer positions [will be] ready and waiting for them."²⁷

The patterns described in the development of lady orchestras and instrumental training for women follow the sociological model of occupational change in which there is a correlation between social opinion and job opportunity. Prejudices against women players were rationalizations designed to protect the limited job market against competition. With respect to composition, however, the historical flow of opinion and the need for such prejudice is less obvious. There is no job market for composers equivalent to that for performers. Furthermore, the issues involved in the debate about women composers were weighty intellectual concepts about creativity and biological determinism rather than social propriety and money. The debate was all the more fierce for its abstractions.

The debate over women as composers began in the 1880s with the publication of George Upton's book *Woman in Music*. The opinions of Upton, who was a prominent critic for the *Chicago Tribune*, carried a great deal of weight. His work went through two editions by 1899 and was consistently referred to in articles of the period and of the 1900s.

Essentially, Upton's main concern was to resolve a central paradox in nineteenth-century beliefs. If music was the art of emotions, it logically followed that women, who were believed to be more emotional than men, should excel in its creation. According to Upton, however, woman failed because she could not objectify emotion by translating it into any other medium. She could experience and re-create, that is, execute; but she could not create. Furthermore, music was not *all* feeling. It also depended upon the ability to think logically and to abstract, both exclusively male powers:

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Every technical detail of music is characterized by science in its most rigid forms. In this direction woman, except in rare instances, has never achieved great results. It does not seem that women will ever originate music in its fullest and grandest harmonic forms. She will always be the recipient and interpreter but there is little hope that she will be the creator.²⁸

Musical creativity was, therefore, masculine by definition because it relied on male intellectual and psychological resources. Music was, as a writer in the *Atlantic Monthly* termed it, a "masculine idea." There neither had ever been nor ever could be a great female composer. Women did not have recourse to greater emotional resources, because men were actually more "emotional" than women: "Woman as the lesser man is comparatively deficient in active emotional force. . . . Much of what passes in women for true emotion is mere nervous excitability." Wagner's operas and Beethoven's symphonies are good examples of the kind of music women can't write because of their lack of emotional power.²⁹

These arguments were countered by veterans of the women's rights movements and their sympathizers. Alice Stone Blackwell, a leading feminist and editor of the *Women's Journal*, wrote:

It is probably true that more women than men have received musical instruction of a sort, but not of the sort which qualifies anyone to become a composer. Girls are as a rule taught music superficially, simply as an accomplishment. To enable them to play and sing agreeably is the whole object of their music lessons. It is exceedingly rare that a girl's father cares to have her taught the underlying laws of harmony or the principles of musical composition.

In Germany and Italy, the countries where the greatest musical composers have originated, the standard of women's education is especially low and the idea of woman's sphere particularly restricted. The German or Italian girl who should confess an ambition to become a composer would be regarded by her friends as out her sphere, if not out of her mind.

When women have had for several centuries the same advantages of liberty, education, and social encouragement in the use of their brains that men have, it will be right to argue their mental inferiority if they have not produced their fair share of geniuses. But it is hardly reasonable to expect women during a few years of half liberty and half education to produce at once specimens of genius equal to the choicest men of all the ages.³⁰

The role of patron was also attacked. The image of woman as muse, so precious to writers like Ruskin or George Upton, who filled his book on women in music with vignettes about composers' wives, was rejected with the kind of arguments Amy Fay, renowned

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pianist and teacher, used in 1900 to explain the lack of a great female composer:

Women have been too much taken with helping and encouraging men to place a proper value on their own talent, which they are prone to underestimate and to think not worth making the most of. Their whole training from time immemorial has tended to make them take an intense interest in the work of men and to stimulate them to their best efforts. Ruskin was quite right when he so patronizingly said that "Woman's chief function is praise." She has praised and praised and kept herself in abeyance.³¹

In the lead article for the *Etude* special issue, *Women in Music* (September 1901), Fanny Morris Smith specifically rebutted Upton's ideas, disparaging the looseness of most discussions of the "woman question." The contributions of women in the past were greater than Upton allowed, she argued, while their opportunities in the present were far less. The two major reasons why women as a class had not composed in the nineteenth century were thus stated:

The noble masculine spirit who cheered and upheld the fainting hopes of the feminine musical genius has yet to make his appearance in history. . . . The other great reason why women did not compose much before the last part of the nineteenth century is because they had, as a class, *no money*. They did not support themselves, as a rule, and had no control of the funds necessary for a composer's education or for publication.

The significance of feminist arguments is the mode in which they rebutted nineteenth-century attitudes toward women. In effect, they used arguments about socialization and environment to counter psychological and biological determinism. In so doing, they indirectly focused on the sociological aspects of musical creativity. In opposition to the romantic notions of the creative artist in artistic isolation and the romantic belief in the "rational male" as opposed to the "intuitive female," feminist musicians argued about the effect of class and status on creativity. Society could not determine which individual would be gifted with genius, but it could determine which groups had access to the institutions that support art. No one could become a musician in an Emily Dickinson attic. Society could also shape the expectations about the potentialities of groups that acted as self-fulfilling prophecies.

The "emancipated woman," of which the new female composer was one representative, knew better. She no longer believed that musical creativity was masculine. As Florence Sutro wrote in 1893:

Great intellectual effort and strong reasoning [are not] . . . the proprietary right of men. Fortunately my sex has already sufficiently advanced in its revolutionary progress through mental emancipation that it no longer accepts such doctrines as those as law.

We have begun to think for ourselves. And as we think for ourselves, we shall begin to compose.³²

The politically charged cultural climate produced countless other articles repeating the charges of discrimination or claims of mental emancipation.³³ Certainly, the handbooks and dictionaries tended to inflate contributions of women composers, past and present. But they were provoked or countered by equally biased attacks on the music of women composers or on the women's movement in general. The reviewer of Otto Ebel's *Women Composers* wrote in 1903:

Some men and a few women, disposed to be just, have not hesitated to declare that until a woman produces a masterpiece the fair sex cannot hope to take high rank as composers. The strongminded sisterhood, on the other hand, looking as usual through lurid glasses, claim that there are some great women composers, and the reason there are not more is wholly the fault of man's selfishness and tyranny. Education and independence were denied to women for centuries after these blessed privileges were vouchsafed to men; hence why expect women to be the equal of men in all things? No one expects it, dear sisters.³⁴

The polemics surrounding the female composer inevitably affected the kind of music she wrote and the ways in which it was received. The conflict between her role as a woman and her role as a composer was resolved through the development of sexual aesthetics, which analyzed music as a combination of masculine and feminine traits; therefore, music written by women should and did express "femininity." As descriptive metaphors, the terms *masculine* and *feminine* were hardly alien to nineteenth-century music criticism. Schumann, for example, described a pair of Schubert trios in just such terms: Opus 99 was "more passive, lyric and feminine," while Opus 100 was "active, masculine and dramatic."³⁵ Furthermore, as metaphors used to describe the expressive range of music, such language did not *logically* need to confine the woman composer. She, like Schubert, could write either masculine or feminine music. However, the language of Romantic music criticism degenerated into the language of sexual aesthetics, in which the potentialities of the individual female composer were defined through the application of sexual stereotypes.

Femininity in music was alleged to be delicate, graceful, refined,

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Table 6
"Femininity" and "Masculinity" in Music c. 1900

| | <i>Eternal Feminine</i> (ewige weibliche) | <i>Man-tone</i> ³⁶ (virile) |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| 1. Emotive content | delicate, sensitive, graceful, refined, spontaneous | powerful, broad, noble |
| 2. Musical qualities | lyrical, melodious | intellectual, theoretical (e.g., use of harmony or counterpoint) |
| 3. Genres | songs, piano pieces (the "smaller forms") | symphonies, opera, chamber music (the "higher class" of compositions) |
| 4. Model composers | Chopin, Mendelssohn | Beethoven, Wagner |

and sensitive. It was defined as the *eternal feminine* (sometimes by the German phrase *ewige weibliche*), which was drawn from Goethe's concept of womanhood. (Because of the great vogue of German music, especially Wagnerian opera, in the late nineteenth century, the German term was frequently used by American critics.) Through 1900 the aesthetics of the eternal feminine in music included both form and style, as well as emotive content (see table 6 for a summary comparison). Vocal music was the essence of *ewige weibliche* because it "appeals more directly to the heart."³⁷ Since harmony and counterpoint were "logical," they were alien to femininity. Instead of musical intellect, women were supposed to rely on their imaginations, from which "beautiful melodies could flow." The concert pianist Fanny Bloomfield-Zeisler believed in this allegedly inherent sex difference. She wrote:

I am no "woman's emancipator." There are many fields of intellectual activity which women never do or can trespass without sacrificing their more delicate or sensitive nature, the *ewige weibliche* (ever womanly). . . . What we need now is not to imitate man and try to become great in a field in which he has achieved success, but to develop those qualities which specifically belong to woman . . . that is, beautiful melodies.³⁸

Romantic ideology traditionally defined women as emotional and passive and men as objective and active. Probably the hardening of the polarities in music criticism was no different from that taking place in other intellectual spheres.³⁹ Theories of evolution had raised the issue of biological determinism; and creativity, like power, was seen as fixed by genetic heritage. For women composers, the belief in sex-determined achievement reinforced centuries of traditional discrimination.

The eternal-feminine aesthetic, therefore, provided a referential vocabulary in which the music of composers could be judged by a double standard that placed them in a double bind. If, on the one hand, they composed in the smaller "feminine" forms, such as songs and piano pieces, they were thereby demonstrating their sexually derived inadequacies to think in the larger abstract forms. If, on the other hand, they attempted the larger forms, they were betraying their sexual identities by writing "man-tone" music. Sexual aesthetics therefore functioned as a way of keeping female composers on the traditional periphery of composition.

Even Rupert Hughes, a critic sympathetic to women composers, distinguished between the eternal feminine and the man-tone music of symphonies and operas. He charitably allowed that "art knows no sex"; nonetheless, women writing in "man-tone" were "seeking after virility."⁴⁰ Hughes cited the songs of Margaret Lang as examples of the "supremely womanly" in art:

Some of Miss Lang's frailer songs show the qualities many people expect in womanliness more than the works of any of these other writers. . . . The "Spinning Song" is inexpressibly sad, and such music as women best understand, and therefore ought to make best. But womanliness equally marks "The Grief of Love" . . . marks the bitterness of "Oh, What Comes over the Sea." Her "Lament" I consider one of the greatest of songs, and proof positive of woman's high capabilities for composition.

Hughes judged Lang's work by the degree to which the emotive content of her work corresponded to his ideas about womanliness: "Personally, I see in Miss Lang's composition such a depth of psychology that I place the general quality of her work above that of any other composer. It is devoid of meretriciousness and of any suspicion of seeking after virility."

Despite all of this, the late nineteenth century witnessed two constructive changes for women composers. One, a correlate of the debate over the woman question, was an enormous increase in women composers' visibility, that is to say, public acknowledgment

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that they existed. Even though numbers of women had published sheet music before 1870, they had never achieved public status comparable to that of their contemporaries in literature. By the 1890s this was changing. In an article for *Century Magazine*, critic Rupert Hughes wrote: "Only yesterday it was being said how strange it was that women could not write music. Today their compositions make up a surprisingly large portion of the total publication. . . . Now the manuscripts submitted by women outnumber those of the men two to one."⁴¹ Those who in the past had denied female creativity would no doubt change their views if they could but hear the music of American women. For it was "the very dawn of what . . . is to be a great epoch of composition by women." Otto Ebel echoed these sentiments a few years later:

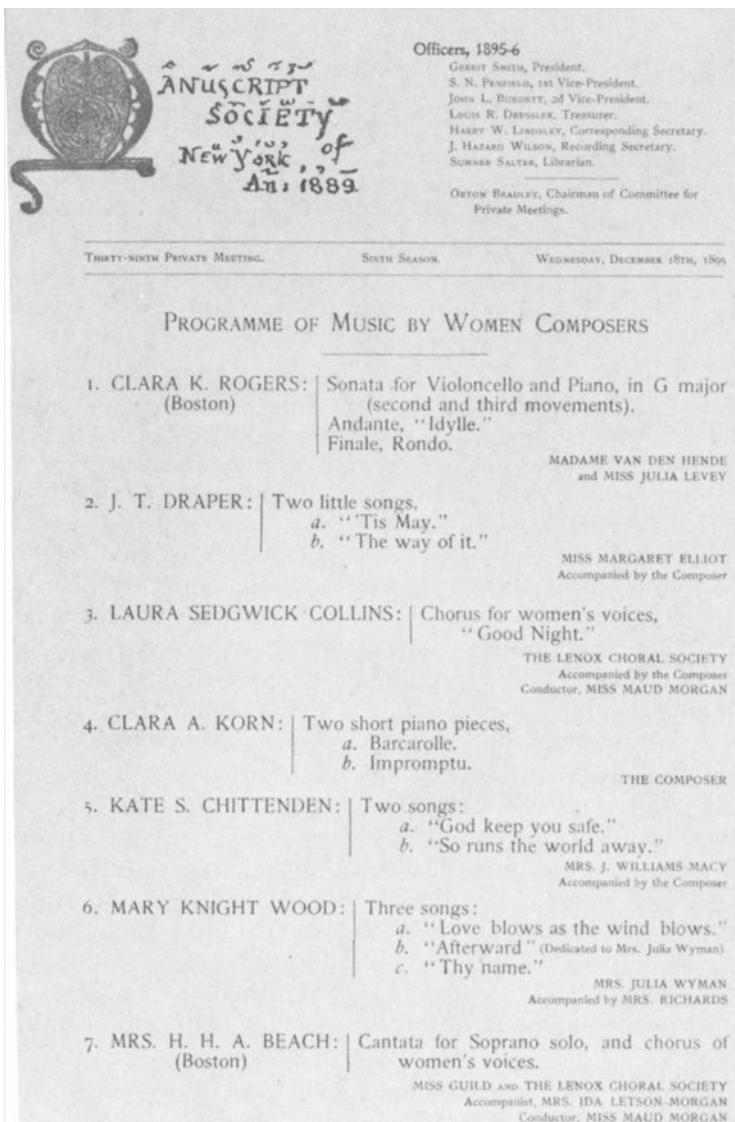
Scarcely 50 years ago the subjects of harmony and counterpoint had been considered outside the province of women's education, and the acquirement of such knowledge, other than as a pastime, would have been regarded as a mental aberration. . . . It therefore must be considered a great point gained that it is no longer looked upon as an eccentricity for women to compose.⁴²

Music journals, concert societies, and professional organizations acknowledged women composers in a variety of ways quite similar to those in the 1970s. Both the *Etude*⁴³ and the *Musician* instituted feature columns on women's work in music, the latter designed to celebrate "the increasing activity of women in all phases of musical life, her aggressive and authoritative entrance in spheres heretofore monopolized by men."⁴⁴ The percentage of women in the New York Manuscript Society, a professional composers' organization, doubled between 1892 and 1898. In 1895 and 1900 the society gave concerts devoted entirely to women composers.⁴⁵ (See plate 19.) At the annual meetings of the Music Teachers National Association in 1897, a "woman's department" was headed by Florence Sutro; it included lectures on women's history, an exhibition, and concerts.⁴⁶ Sutro was also the first president of the National Federation of Music Clubs, which was founded in 1898. From its inception, the federation provided an arena for the promotion and performance of music by women.⁴⁷

All this is not to suggest that there were no women composers in the United States before the Civil War. By the 1870s women had indeed been accepted as composers within the proscribed sphere of parlor music, which in fact was the dominating musical culture of prewar American urban life.⁴⁸ English composers, such as Virginia

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Plate 19



Source: Music Division, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center,
Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations

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Gabriel and Charlotte Allington Barnard,⁴⁹ and their far fewer American counterparts, such as Faustina Hodges (1822–95) and Mrs. E. A. (Susan) Parkhurst (1836–1918), both wrote parlor songs that musicalized upper-middle-class notions of a woman's "sphere." It is telling that Hodges's famous song, *The Rose Bush* (1859), was described by a critic as "an epitome of woman's life."⁵⁰

Between 1870 and 1900 parlor music lost its dominating hold on taste, partly because musical forms at opposite ends of the spectrum developed larger audiences, economic foundations, and greater commercial potential. For women these created new options to a certain extent, and most of these options came within the world of classical rather than popular music. With respect to composition, only a very few women seem to have benefited from the enormous growth of the popular-song industry in the 1890s. To be sure, there were more women performers within minstrel shows and early vaudeville. After 1870 the barrier against the appearance of women on the stage as actress-singers in minstrel shows was broken, with the rise of burlesque and the eclectic postwar minstrel troupes that included blacks as well as women.⁵¹ But apart from an occasional singer-turned-songwriter, such as Maud Nugent, and a few ragtime composers, Tin Pan Alley was not the milieu to which women songwriters gravitated.⁵²

Despite the large number of women writing songs, the whole tradition of music as an "accomplishment" predisposed them toward what is still regarded as the margins of popular song—the semi-classical genres—rather than the urban ethnic song that fed Tin Pan Alley. It is significant that the most successful female song composer of this period—Carrie Jacobs-Bond—had to start her own music publishing company to print the songs that were rejected by Tin Pan Alley publishers for being too "classical."⁵³ Bond and other composers like Mary Turner Salter and Mary Knight Wood continued to write Victorian parlor songs through the turn of the century. Such songs as Salter's *The Cry of Rachel* (1905) and Wood's *Ashes of Roses* (1892) are descendants of Hodges's *The Rose Bush*.

In contrast, women made more striking progress as classical composers. The 1890s witnessed a number of historic firsts in the composition and performance of their works in the "higher forms" of orchestral and choral music: among them the first orchestral composition by a woman to be performed by a major American symphony orchestra; the first symphony, the first concerto, and the first large-scale choral composition. It is beyond the scope of this study to

examine the lives and works of individual composers in detail, but the major achievements of the period are worth noting.⁵⁴

The outstanding figures in the 1890s were Margaret Ruthven Lang (1867–1972), Helen Hopekirk (1856–1945), and Amy Cheney Beach (1867–1943). To Lang goes the honor of having the first performance of an orchestral work. Her *Dramatic Overture* was played by the Boston Symphony in 1893. Between 1893 and 1896 she also wrote two other orchestral overtures, *Totila* and *Wichitis*, and three arias for solo voice and orchestra, all of which received performances. Helen Hopekirk was a Scottish concert pianist who emigrated to Boston in 1897. Her American premiere tour included a performance with the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1883, and she performed her Piano Concerto in D Major with that orchestra in 1900. The concerto was her second work for piano and orchestra; an early *Concertstück*, written in Europe, had been played in 1894.

The most famous and by far the most important of the turn-of-the-century women composers was Amy Cheney Beach, known throughout her long career as Mrs. H. H. A. Beach. Beach was the first American woman to achieve an international reputation as a composer of orchestral and chamber music, in addition to many compositions for piano and voice.⁵⁵ Her Mass in E-flat was performed by the Boston Handel and Haydn Society in 1892; her Gaelic Symphony in E Minor (1896) was a landmark work. It was followed in 1899 by a Piano Concerto in C-sharp Minor, which Beach performed with the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

How is the intense activity of this particular decade to be explained? Without doubt some of the factors that led to the growth of lady orchestras contributed here as well. More women were entering the labor force. A sense prevailed that the "superfluous women"—who might never marry—had to take work seriously, and more women were attending the newly founded conservatories. There was also an ideology of cultural feminism, at least for the upper-middle classes, and we have already mentioned the activities of the National Federation of Music Clubs in promoting works by women composers. Further evidence of political mobilization can be seen in the founding of the Women's Philharmonic Society in New York in 1899 by Amy Fay, the pianist, and her sister, Melusina Fay Pierce. The society was deliberately intended to "promote effort and achievement—in the performance, composition, theory, and history of music."⁵⁶

More particularly there was a factor of place. Just as the court of Ferrara had served to nurture the talents of women singers in late

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sixteenth-century Italy, the city of Boston served as a similar hub in the 1890s. It took its role as cultural center seriously, and the education of women and their role in the community were matters of civic consciousness. Not for nothing did Henry James place his novel about feminism in that city.⁵⁷ Boston had a tradition of supporting American composers; it also had a publishing house—that of Arthur P. Schmidt—which printed contemporary music. More to the point, we have already mentioned the influence of Julius Eichberg in training female instrumentalists. Boston was also the home of a group of composers sufficiently focused there to become known as the “Boston group”: George Chadwick, who taught Margaret Lang and Helen Hood; Arthur Foote; and John Knowles Paine.

The women active in composition also had strong ties to the cultural institutions of the city, such as the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the Handel and Haydn Society, and the Caecilia Club. Amy Beach and Helen Hopekirk were performers and soloists with the orchestra. Margaret Lang was the daughter of a prominent local musician. Her “easy and casual access to the Symphony,” to quote music-historian Laurine Elkins-Marlow, was remarkable. Lang recalled in an interview late in her life: “They told me to take some Grieg to the orchestra and hear how it sounded so I could learn about orchestration. So I went to one of Nikisch’s rehearsals and they played it for me. Things were so easy in those days.”⁵⁸

The significance of the achievements of this generation of women composers can be gauged by the number of years that passed before their work was matched. Beach’s Symphony in E Minor (1896) retained its singularity until 1932. Her concerto (1899) and that of Hopekirk (1900) were followed by one in 1908, the work of another Boston composer, Mabel Daniels, and then by no other until 1925.⁵⁹ In addition, the 1890s—their fledgling years as composers—were obviously special, since what followed tended to be smaller works: in some cases pieces for women’s chorus, in others chamber music and solo piano compositions.⁶⁰

Obviously the process by which women composers came of age was begun but not completed in the 1890s. Their compositions were not, surprisingly, treated without a certain amount of ambivalence, given their exceptional status and the critical climate of which we have already spoken. The social grammar of sexual judgment was there to be used. To take one example, both virility and femininity were ascribed to Beach’s symphony. Its premiere on 30 October 1896 was a controversial event. Both its virtues and its faults were alleged

illustrations of the "eternal feminine." The *Women's Journal* chronicled the event on 6 November as one that gave them "no slight satisfaction and pride."

The Boston critic Philip Hale was equally impressed: "It is fortunately not necessary to say of the *Gaelic Symphony* 'this is a creditable work for woman.' Such patronage is uncalled for, and it would be offensive. . . . This symphony is the fullest exhibition of Mrs. Beach's indisputable talent." Nevertheless, despite Hale's praise for the "elemental swing, force and grandeur of the finale," he still related the defects of the orchestration to Beach's sex: "Occasionally she is noisy rather than sonorous. Here she is eminently feminine. A woman who writes for orchestra thinks 'I must be virile at any cost. . . .' The only trace of woman I find in this symphony is this boisterousness."⁶¹ What Hale meant by virility was excessively heavy orchestration. The implication is that, because of prejudice against women composers, Beach overcompensated by overwriting.

Then, too, women who sought after "virility" by writing in the higher forms defeated themselves. A critic for the *Musical Courier* wrote in a review of a performance of Beach's symphony:

The symphony of Mrs. Beach is too long, too strenuously worked over and attempts too much. . . . Almost every modern composer has left a trace in her score, which in its efforts to be Gaelic and masculine ends in being monotonous and spasmodic. . . . There is no gainsaying her industry, her gift for melody . . . and her lack of logic. Contrapuntally she is not strong. Of grace and delicacy there are evidences in the Sicilana [sic], and there she is at her best, "but yet a woman."⁶²

But, ironically, the composer George Chadwick, who was a personal friend of Beach, allegedly had the opposite reaction. According to a story in the *Etude*, "When George Wakefield Chadwick first heard Mrs. Beach's symphony, 'Gaelic,' he is said to have exclaimed: 'Why was not I born a woman?' It was the delicacy of thought and finish in her musical expression that had struck him, an expression of true womanliness, absolute in its sincerity."⁶³

The critical reception of Beach's symphony symbolizes the ambiguities and tensions that accompanied the emergence of the woman composer from the parlor into the professional world of music as art. Women composers had to combat the stereotypes of dilettante and "piano girl" that were the legacy of the tradition of musical "accomplishment" for women. Still, the piano girl slowly gave way to, or at least found a strong competitor in, the "new woman." The tradition declined under social and economic pressures and a healthier, freer climate for creative American women. No doubt one could trace its

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vestiges today, and certainly its influence was not limited to women but affected men as well, in ways that have yet to be explored.

Beach's music stands on its own artistic merits. But her achievements and those of her generation shine even brighter in historical context, for they created options for other women who had remained within the traditional world of parlor music. By the turn of the century, women shared a vision of a future in which economic and social self-determination would have deep artistic parallels. Fanny Morris Smith proudly summed up the change in 1901:

The first practical entrance of women into music as composers has been within the last twenty-five years. . . . Within this time women have been pressed into self-support; colleges have been established; women have competed for and obtained university degrees; women dentists, lawyers, clergy, physicians, scientists, painters, architects, farmers, inventors, and merchants have all made their advent. Side by side with them has arrived the woman composer. She has come to stay.⁶⁴

NOTES

Portions of this essay have appeared in Judith Tick, "Women as Professional Musicians in the United States, 1870–1900," *Yearbook for Inter-American Research* 9 (1973): 95–133, and appear here with permission. Portions have also appeared in *id.*, *American Women Composers before 1870* (Ann Arbor, ©1983), and are reprinted here courtesy of UMI Research Press.

1. James Huneker, *Overtones* (New York, 1904), p. 286.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Sex-typed occupations are defined by sociologist Robert Merton as those "in which a very large majority of those in them are of one sex and when there is an associated normative expectation that this is as it should be." See Cynthia Epstein, *Woman's Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 154.

4. *Proceedings of the Nineteenth Annual Meeting of the Music Teachers National Association*, 24–28 June 1897, p. 172.

5. Blanche Naylor, *The Anthology of the Fadettes* (Boston, 1937), p. 8.

6. Camilla Urso, "Woman Violinists as Performers in the Orchestras," quoted in *Freund's Weekly*, 16 July 1893, p. 5. For the letter, see *Musical Courier*, 9 March 1898.

7. See Judith Tick, *American Women Composers before 1870* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), for a discussion of music as a feminine accomplishment.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

9. Christine Ammer, *Unsung* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980), pp. 100–101.

10. See Camilla Urso, "On Maud Powell," in *My Adventures in the Golden Age of Music*, by Henry T. Finck (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1926), p. 311. "Maud Powell, one of the pioneers of women musicians in America. When she was a girl there was still a strong prejudice against women in instrumental music. Pianists of the fair sex were beginning to be tolerated, but the violin—surely the line must be drawn there!" When Huneker accused Maud Powell of not sufficiently emphasizing the feminine traits of music, she explained that she did this purposely because of the existing prejudice against women violinists.

11. Julius Eichberg, Scrapbooks, Music Research Division, Boston Public Library.

12. For a reprint of the review from the *New York Times*, 13 September 1871, see Carol Neuls-Bates, *Women in Music: An Anthology of Source Readings from the Middle Ages to the Present* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 192ff.

13. According to the *American Art Journal*, 6 September 1884, the vaudeville theater manager John Graham "dressed up a young man as a woman to play the double bass to keep up the reputation of the group as a lady orchestra."

14. Atlantic Garden clippings, Theater Collection, New York Public Library, *New York Telegraph*, 23 March 1916: "The Atlantic Garden had the first woman's orchestra ever used in America, and the playing of its members was cause of argument, many holding, while others disagreed, that they did not perform as well as men."

15. *Atlantic Garden Programme*, 28 September 1896, advertisement. The cover of the program shows a female performer in a white dress, the trademark of the Ladies' Elite.

16. Edward Marks, *They All Sang* (New York: Viking Press, 1935), p. 6. Marks claims the tunes were arranged to suit the women: "Four-bar schmalz I used to call him [the arranger for the orchestra], because he would fix every tune so that there would be four bars of melody and then four of rest, or harmonic accompaniment, to give the ladies a chance to catch their wind."

17. The program for 28 September 1896 included *March, the Niagara*, N. D. Mann; selection from *Robert Le Diable*, Meyerbeer; *Galop*, Strauss; medley of songs of the day; *Waltz*, Vollstedt; *Overture*, Suppe.

18. Quoted in John Mueller, *The American Symphony Orchestra* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1951), p. 309. Emphasis added.

19. "Women Musicians in Festival Works," *Woman's Journal*, 29 April 1893.

20. Naylor, *The Fadettes*, p. 13. The instruments included were four first violins, two second violins, one viola, one cello, two basses, one flute, one clarinet, two cornets, two horns, one trombone, timpani, snare drum, bass drum, traps, and harp.

21. Joe Laurie, Jr., *Vaudeville: From the Honky-Tonks to the Palace* (New York: Henry Holt, 1953), p. 67.

22. Naylor, *The Fadettes*, p. 8.

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23. E. C. Hughes, "Dilemmas and Contradictions of Status," in *The Sociological Eye* (New York: Aldine-Atherton Press, 1971), p. 149, develops this concept as one that reconciles status conflicts, e.g., women doctors serve in those branches of medicine that are compatible with stereotypes about women, such as pediatrics.
24. Mueller, *American Symphony Orchestra*, p. 309. This is the reason the *Musical Courier* was against integrated orchestras—women allegedly "could not endure" such competition.
25. "Opinions of New York Leaders on Women as Orchestral Players," *Musical Standard*, 2 April 1904.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.* Whether or not there is still de facto segregation is open to question. Mueller says it was "a matter of public comment" when Cleveland included four women in 1923.
28. George Upton, *Woman in Music* (Chicago, 1880), p. 23.
29. Edith Brower, "Is the Musical Idea Masculine?" *Atlantic Monthly*, March 1894, pp. 332–39.
30. *Woman's Journal*, 29 August 1891.
31. Amy Fay, "Women and Music," *Music* 18 (October 1900): 505–7.
32. Florence Sutro, *Women in Music and Law* (New York, 1895), p. 10, a paper read for the Clef Club in 1893.
33. For example, John Towers, *Women in Music* (Winchester, Va., 1897); Adolph Willhartitz, *Some Facts about Women in Music* (Los Angeles, 1902).
34. "Women Composers of All Lands," a review of *Women Composers*, by Otto Ebel, *Musical Courier* (January 1903): 19.
35. R. Schumann, *On Music and Musicians*, trans. P. Rosenfeld (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. 121.
36. The phrase *man-tone* comes from Rupert Hughes, *Contemporary American Composers* (New York, 1900), p. 434.
37. T. L. Krebs, "Women as Musicians," *Sewanee Review* 2 (1893): 77.
38. Fanny Bloomfield-Zeisler, "Women in Music," *American Art Journal* (17 October 1891).
39. See Jill Conway, "Stereotypes of Femininity in a Theory of Sexual Evolution," *Victorian Studies* 14 (September 1970): 47–61.
40. Hughes, *Contemporary American Composers*, p. 434.
41. Rupert Hughes, "Women Composers," *Century Magazine* (March 1898): 768–79. This estimate was from an unnamed "prominent publisher."
42. Otto Ebel, *Women Composers* (Brooklyn: F. H. Chandler, 1902), preface.
43. *Etude* began its series in 1901.
44. *Musician* 5 (6 March 1900).
45. The percentage of women's membership increased from 6 percent (5 out of 82) in 1892 to 14.5 percent (19 out of 130) in 1898. This statistic was computed from membership lists in the scrapbook on the Manuscript Society in the New York Public Library. The program on 18 December 1895 was entirely by "the women composers who were members of the society

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- and it was interpreted by women." Sumner Salter, "Early Encouragements to American Composers," *Musical Quarterly* 18 (January 1932): 76–105.
46. *Proceedings of . . . Annual Meeting of the Music Teachers National Association*, 1897, pp. 171–72.
47. *Musical Age* 21 (17 March 1898): 6.
48. Tick, *American Women Composers*, p. 73.
49. Charles Hamm, *Yesterdays* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), p. 185. Hamm calls Barnard, known as Claribel, "one of the most skilled and sensitive writers of the entire nineteenth century in Great Britain."
50. Tick, *American Women Composers*, p. 171.
51. Robert Toll, *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 149.
52. Nugent wrote *Sweet Rosie O'Grady* in 1896.
53. Hamm, *Yesterdays*, p. 323.
54. For more details, see Ammer, *Unsung*, chap. 4.
55. For information, see Burnet Tuthill, "Mrs. H. H. A. Beach," *Musical Quarterly* 26 (1940): 297–310; E. Lindsay Merrill, "Mrs. H. H. A. Beach: Her Life and Work" (Ph.D. diss., University of Rochester, 1963). A new study of Beach would be welcome. In the last few years a number of recordings of her work have been issued, among them the Piano Quintet in F-sharp Minor (op. 67), the Trio in A Minor for Violin, Cello, and Piano (op. 150), the Piano Concerto in C-sharp Minor (op. 45), and the Sonata in A Minor for Violin and Piano (op. 34).
56. Margaret W. McCarthy, "A Critical Study of the Career of Amy Fay in America," a paper delivered at the national convention of the College Music Society, fall 1978, p. 7.
57. Henry James, *The Bostonians*.
58. Laurine Elkins-Marlow, "American Women as Orchestral Composers, 1890–1960: An Unfamiliar Heritage," author's papers; Margo Miller, "Oldest BSO Subscriber Recalls Gentle World of the Past," *Boston Globe*, February 1967, Margaret Ruthven Lang Collection, Boston Public Library.
59. Laurine Elkins-Marlow, "What Have Women in This Country Written for Full Orchestra?" *Symphony News* 27 (April 1976): 15–19.
60. Ammer, *Unsung*, chap. 4 passim.
61. Philip Hale, *Musical and Drama Criticism 1892–1900*, microfilm, New York Public Library, p. 317. Also "Beach's Gaelic Symphony," *Boston Tribune*, 1 November 1896; "Women as Symphony Makers," *ibid.*, 4 November 1896.
62. *Musical Courier* (23 February 1898), pp. 29–30.
63. *Etude* (February 1904).
64. Fanny Morris Smith, "The Record of Woman in Music," *ibid.* (September 1901), p. 317.