Women's Participation in Sacred Western Choral Singing:

The Medieval Church, Venetian *Ospedali*, and Brahms's *Frauenchor*

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Introduction

It may be surprising to see an A6 in Bach's *Mass in B minor* and remember that his soprano parts were most likely never performed by women during his lifetime. Because it is so common now to hear mixed choirs perform sacred choral works by Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Palestrina, and other well-known composers from the Renaissance to the Classical era, it's often forgotten that women were not permitted to perform these works in churches until just decades ago.

Because women were usually not the intended performers of sacred choral works until the 19th century, choral directors must be aware of the music's potential inaccessibility for women, whether that be vocal technique or personal connection to the music. However, success in singing these works is far from impossible, and mixed choirs have been performing pre-nineteenth-century sacred choral works for decades. Choral directors cannot expect the same sound from their mixed choir as the original composers intended, nor should they – and instead of asking female sopranos and altos to sing in a historically accurate style that was never designed for them, it is the director's job to reimagine and teach these beautiful sacred works in ways that celebrate female voices. For female choral singers to feel truly included and comfortable performing these works, conductors must recognize the exclusion women have faced for centuries while acknowledging the historically undervalued female musicians who have been composing and singing sacred choral music since medieval times.

Medieval to Renaissance

Antiphonal singing in church services is an ancient Jewish tradition brought to the Christians by Bardesanes (154-222 CE) in Persia, who composed hymns and psalms in the psalter style for the congregation in Edessa. The early Catholic Church revised this practice through the Synod of Antioch in 379, ruling that women cannot combine on one melody. In response, most churches divided their congregations into two choirs: one for men and another for women and children. This practice was called *antiphonia*, and was enforced in Rome, Milan, and Constantinople during the late 300s.[1] As the church in Rome developed, opportunities to sing were given only to men, and women were forbidden to participate. In the medieval period, women only performed sacred music in convents, where men were not present. A prominent historical figure in this setting was the composer Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179), a cantrix (female cantor) who wrote approximately 77 religious songs and at least one musical drama, called *Ordo virtutum*.[2]

During the Renaissance, boy sopranos and later, castrati, were the regular treble performers in church choirs in Italy. The first castrato to sing with the Sistine Chapel signed the employment register in 1559, and the practice of hiring castrati spread throughout Europe and replaced the “Spanish falsettists,” although the French never preferred the castrati (claiming it was against the laws of nature). The Sistine Chapel employed castrati until 1903.[3] The Reformation, however, began a cascade of significant societal events, including an increasing number of women choral participants. There may have been trained women’s choirs in Calvinist churches in Switzerland and France during the mid-1500s, considering the manuscripts of Goudimel’s setting of *8 psalms for 4 high voices* in 1565. It was more common for women to participate in singing in Protestant churches, as the Roman church still fully excluded women

[1] Stanfield Prichard, “What Did Women Sing?” 189.
[2] Spurgeon, “The History of Women Singing in Groups,” 12.
[3] Stanfield Prichard, “What Did Women Sing?” 190.

from the liturgy. French royal chapels under the rule of Louis XIV hired women as soloists starting around 1650.[4] Jean Baptiste Lully wrote his *petit motets* for nuns at the Convent of the Assumption in the 1680s.

The Venetian *Ospedali*

The most well-established musical institutions for girls and women during the Renaissance period were the Venetian *ospedali*. The *Ospedali Grandi* comprised several organizations that provided care and social services to the sick, poor, hungry, elderly, and orphaned. Venice was in high demand for these services due to its high traffic and history of famine, plague, and war. There were four *ospedali* in Venice, three of them under the jurisdiction of the *Ospedali Grandi*: the *Ospedali di San Lezzaro e dei Mendicanti* (founded 1182), the *Ospedale Della Pietà* (founded 1336), the *Incurabili* (founded 1517), and the *Ospedaletto* (founded 1518). All were renowned for their excellence in conservatory-style music education for orphan girls. The religious life was similar to that of a monastery, observing the Divine Office and enforcing heavily structured daily routines. Not all girls were taught music, but those selected (called the *figlie di coro*, or "girl musicians") learned to sing and play instruments from highly regarded musicians, composers, and teachers. Maestri were employed as vocal and instrumental instructors, the highest authority given to the *maestro di coro*, the choir director.

The *maestro di coro* was expected to write new works for most special services throughout the year. Since they wrote with their ensemble in mind, the *ospedali* produced a notable collection of works for female voices, some of which are still available today. The girls' choir, or *coro*, an exclusive ensemble of the school's most talented singers, performed five major forms of sacred repertoire: masses, hymns, motets, Marian antiphons, and psalms. Their music was seen as an act of service to God and the community, and some of the biggest

[4] Ibid, 190.

donations to the church were brought in when the *coro* performed in services or went to public squares to sing and collect alms. The *ospedali* were associated with well-established composers of the time, including Vivaldi, Hasse, Scarlatti, and Lotti, and "of the 300 music teachers and in-house composers employed by the *ospedali*, 170 maestri served concurrent posts as directors of music at one or more Venetian churches, especially St. Mark's Cathedral."[5] Travelers came from all over the world to see the choirs perform, and the tradition continued until the end of the Venetian Republic in the late 1700s. By 1780 the *ospedali* were nearly bankrupt, and the State continued to support them to a degree, but the musical traditions of the institutions had lost their importance. However, the significance of these traditions on a larger scale has not been lost. The training of female musicians and their performances and catalog of sacred music during this time was unparalleled, setting the stage for women's continued study and performance of sacred choral music.

Baroque and Classical

Notable musical opportunities for women during the Baroque period came from the *Maison Royale Saint-Louis de Saint-Cyr*, a boarding school providing music education to aristocratic girls, established in 1686 by the wife of Louis XIV, and from the works of Chiara Margarita Cozzolani (1602-c.1677), a nun at the convent of Santa Radegonda in Milan, notable for her vocal compositions in the *seconda prattica*. England and Russia also had increasing musical opportunities for girls during this time. Later, in 1715 Hamburg, three women were selected to perform operatic soprano solos in one of Johann Mattheson's oratorios, and this was the first time in Hamburg that women performed a sacred work in public, thanks to Mattheson's controversial endorsement. "Although unsuccessful in permanently establishing women in church choirs, he influenced German musical thought considerably, especially in the introduction

[5] MacCallum, "The Sacred Choral Works of the Venetian Ospedali," 35.

of dramatic and concerted music into the Lutheran church."[6] Ultimately, few sacred choral works in the Baroque and Classical eras were composed with female voices in mind.

Brahms and His *Frauenchor* in the Romantic Era

It was not until the collaborative efforts of women alongside Johannes Brahms that female choirs gained prominence in the early Romantic period, establishing a new standard for women in choral performance. Throughout the 18th century, composers were still primarily writing for male voices, especially in the church. But in the 19th century, choral singing was a desirable pastime for the upper middle class and women's choirs were active. However, they would only perform for each other since they were excluded from public performance opportunities. This changed when Brahms began to collaborate with several female composers and singers. When a student of his, Friedchen Wagner, asked if he would compose vocal music for her and her sisters, Brahms wrote his *28 Deutsche Volkslieder*, 10 arranged for 3-part women's voices. Freidchen then invited her friends to sing, and the ensemble grew into the *Frauenchor*, led by Brahms, who at the choir's birth was only 23, similar in age to the choir's singers. Sophie Drinker, author of "Brahms and His Women's Choruses," compiled diary entries of women in the choirs, interviews, and correspondence that revealed rich traditions and a love for the choir and Brahms's direction. In a letter from Brahms to Clara Schumann, he writes:

> "I feel certain that you have enough youthful spirits to be amused by my Girl's Choir, by which I have for once indulged in a conventional pleasure. [T]he choir meets on Monday evening, after which the best alto will be leaving us, so you must hear it on that evening. But you absolutely must enjoy Monday evening with us, so that you can have a taste of the most important of our distractions. It is bright moonlight just now and we will be in a particularly charming house half an hour's walk from the town."[7]

[6] Mount, "Treble Voices in Choral Music," 28.
[7] Drinker, Sophie. "Brahms and His Women's Choruses," 52-53.

Clara Schumann then invited the Hamburger Frauenchor to perform with her in concert in Hamburg in January of 1961. This was an unprecedented moment in history, as it was unheard of to see a women's choir in public performance. This drew more attention to Brahms's works for treble voices, and to women's choirs in general. The choir performed with Schumann again in November of 1961. In addition to his own works, Brahms's group performed Bach, Byrd, Eccard, Gallus, Hassler, Isaac, Lotti, and Palestrina. "Brahms contributed not only to the development of the women's choir through his compositions and performances, but also to the preservation of other significant repertoire for this medium."[8]

In the fall of 1862, Brahms went to Vienna and met several prominent figures in the music community there. When he met the von Asten family, daughters Julie and Anna recruited a group of singers to work with Brahms, and he composed his *Regina Coeli* for this group. His last major contribution to women's chorus repertoire was an arrangement of Schubert's *Ellen's Gesang II*. His work with women's choirs influenced several composers and produced a significant output of works for female voices. Schubert and Mendelssohn's works also contributed heavily to women's choirs during this time.

Beyond the Romantic Period

Once the styles and practices of the Romantic era had been well established, it became the expectation that women sing the soprano and alto choral parts for secular choral performances. This practice spread to the church, although there were still strict guidelines for many congregations, especially Catholic. By the 1900s, American church choirs were including women's voices, but panic ensued when Pope Pius X issued his *Motu Propriu Tra le sollecitudini* of 1903, stating that women could not sing with men, piano and percussion were

[8] Meredith, "The Pivotal Role of Brahms and Schubert in the Development of the Women's Choir," 11.

banned from services, and a preference for Gregorian chant was restated.[9] By 1904, all female soloists had been fired, and many found work elsewhere in Protestant churches and other congregations. In 1953 Pope Pius XII's Papal encyclical Musicae Sacrae Disciplinae allowed women to sing during Mass, but "only outside the presbytery or altar precincts." This was reversed in 1983, which resulted in the formation of several mixed choirs in Anglican churches. The Lincoln Cathedral in England (consecrated in 1092)[10], hired their first female chorister in 2011.

Conclusion

Women have been historically excluded as recognized composers and especially as performers from participation in sacred choral music in the Western tradition since the beginning of the Christian church. However, increasing interest in proper representation of women's contributions to classical music has resulted in more sacred and secular literature becoming available (be it revised editions of older works or new compositions), and more information being published regarding the role of female singers, conductors, and composers throughout history. Through this recent research, more female musicians have been uncovered and recognized for their work, and the number of women contributors is larger than what is traditionally recognized in the canon. Even male composers who worked extensively with and for female choirs are not recognized for their contributions to music for women, and their works for female voices are often overshadowed by their other major outputs. For example, "Despite omission of his work with women's choruses by many historians, Brahms's *Vier Gesang*, Op. 17, is considered by some to be among the composer's highest compositional achievements."[11] Furthermore, it is important to recognize that composers like Brahms would not have had as

[9] Stanfield Prichard, "What Did Women Sing?" 191.
[10] Welcome to Lincolnshire, "Lincoln Cathedral History: A Timeline of 950 Years."
[11] Spurgeon, "Brahms and His Work with Women's Choruses," 64.

much success with their women's choirs had it not been for their female colleagues who invited girls' choirs to perform, and established well-connected communities of female musicians, all while advocating for more representation. Choral conductors who teach sacred choral music from before the Romantic period should not ignore that the music was not intended for female voices. Instead, directors must prioritize the re-interpretation of these works in ways that are vocally accessible and musically worthwhile for women, as well as the incorporation of pre-1800s choral music by and for women into their concert programs.

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