



# North American Undergraduate Pianists' Perceptions of Women Composers

By Kate Acone, NCTM

**M**any classical piano teachers are interested in expanding their repertoire lists to include a more diverse roster of composers, including women. I was interested in the student perspective on these measures: examining what college-aged pianists already know about women composers and their exclusion from the canon. I sent a survey to 93 piano programs in Canada and the U.S. and received 110 responses from undergraduate piano majors. The survey covered demographic information, their past experiences with playing women composers, and their interest in programming women composers in the future.

The results were sobering but not necessarily surprising: 74% of undergraduate piano majors have played music by one or no women. Students have primarily learned

about women composers online on their own, and nearly every respondent wanted more resources from teachers and courses. They demonstrated mixed levels of knowledge about women's canonical exclusion: many believed that no women composed before the 20th century or thought that they composed only small works. Some students also communicated concerns that promoting women composers could either tokenize them or compromise the quality of music performed, highlighting a need for discussing holistic canon formation alongside teaching the work of women composers.

After reading these responses and background literature, my main recommendation for teachers is to consistently include music by women in their teaching repertoire and to expose students to a wide variety of their music. Universities would do well to expand repertoire requirements for auditions and juries so students can choose these works without professional repercussions. Critically, teachers should also discuss historical barriers for women's entry into composition, intersectional issues of class and race, and the process of canonical formation so students have a broader understanding of classical music's landscape. Classical music is becoming more inclusive, and the next generation of pianists is eager for the change. ◀◀

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## Introduction

Piano teachers are now, more than ever, aware of the need to diversify their teaching repertoire at every level. Women composers have been historically underrepresented in classical music, and while institutions and individuals have undertaken efforts to promote their music, the problem still lingers. Studies have shown that adolescents perceive the same music differently when they think it was written by a woman vs. a man,<sup>1</sup> and a recent study of high school students found that just playing women composers' music did not correct students' misconceptions about women's historical and current exclusion in the canon.<sup>2</sup> This study looks at the North American undergraduate pianist population to examine their common knowledge, experiences, and attitudes towards women composers.

## Methodology

110 North American undergraduate students filled out an online survey, which was divided in thirds. The first third covered demographic information, including their country, major, and year in school. The second section asked them to cite past experiences with women composers: to list the women composers they have played, to list the women composers they know of, and to summarize why they think there are not relatively more famous women composers in classical music. The final section, about resources, asked about where they have learned about women composers, whether they are interested in more resources, and if so, which venues they wished offered those resources. The optional final question allowed for general comments.

## Literature Cited

1. North, Adrian C., Ann M. Colley, and David J. Hargreaves. "Adolescents' Perceptions of the Music of Male and Female Composers." *Psychology of Music* 31, no. 2 (April 1, 2003): 139–54.
2. Bonnycastle, Anne. "Female Students Talk About Women Composers: Two Misconceptions and a Self-Limiting Belief." *Canadian Journal of Action Research* 19, no. 2 (June 2018): 67–79.

## Further Information

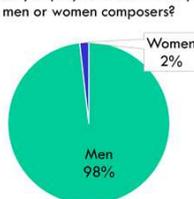
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## Acknowledgments

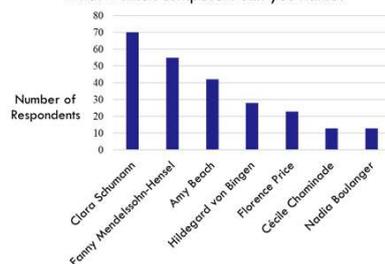
Dr. Midori Koga, Advisor

## Results

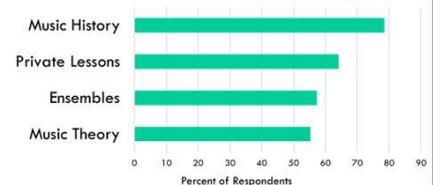
Have you played more music by men or women composers?



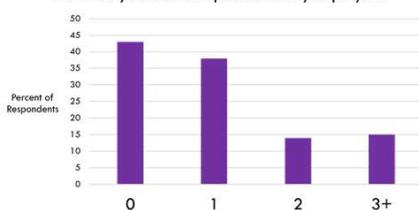
What women composers can you name?



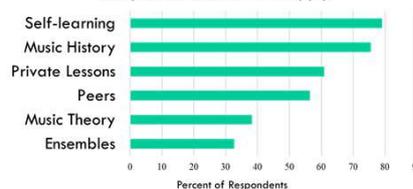
In what settings would you like more resources on women composers? Check all that apply.



How many women composers have you played?



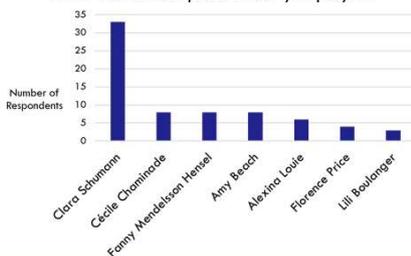
Where have you learned about women composers? Check all that apply.



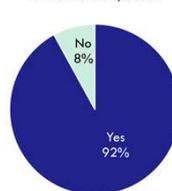
The most cited **historical** reasons for the relative lack of women composers:

1. Broader lack of rights for women and stricter gender roles
2. Stereotypes about women's capabilities and personalities
3. Discrimination against women in classical music, and increased discrimination specifically within composition
4. Bias in canon formation and historical record-keeping

What women composers have you played?



Are you interested in having more resources on women composers?



The most cited **contemporary** reasons for the relative lack of women composers:

1. Standard repertoire requirements and curricula focused on men composers
2. Teachers' unfamiliarity with repertoire by women
3. Discrimination against women composers in classical music's power structures
4. Lack of inclusionary efforts by establishments

## Discussion

Much of this data is sobering on its own. 74% of undergraduate piano majors have played music by one or no women. These students have primarily learned about women composers on their own, and nearly every respondent wanted more resources from teachers and courses.

Students' cited reasons for the relative lack of women in composition was revealing for both their insights and their lingering misconceptions. Many students did not think that women composed before the 20<sup>th</sup> century or thought that they composed mostly small works.

Several students used the optional free-response section to communicate their concerns about the tokenization of women or that this promotion would compromise the quality of music performed, highlighting a need for discussing holistic canon formation alongside teaching the work of women composers.

## Recommendations for Teachers

The most tangible step is for teachers to consistently include music by women in their teaching repertoire, and to expose students to a wide variety of their music. For universities, expanding repertoire requirements for auditions and juries will empower students to choose these works without professional repercussions. In order to effectively combat common misconceptions, it is critical to discuss historical barriers for women's entry into composition and the methods of canon formation alongside programming this music. As several students pointed out, too, discussing intersectionality of how class and race affected classical composition's landscape is essential.