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Composing disappearances – the mythical power behind the woman composer question

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Resumen

Este artículo analiza la influencia de una idea, sencilla pero errónea, en la formación de una realidad patriarcal. A partir de los campos de la musicología, mitología, estudios de creatividad y estética feminista, arguye que la idea de que no han existido compositoras de música clásica ha interactuado con el mito del genio, un mito masculino, para perpetuar las premisas falsas pero auto-afirmativas de esta idea.

A pesar de que el caso de cada compositora es único y complejo, el análisis de las vidas de Fanny Mendelssohn y Clara Schumann, junto con una breve revisión sobre compositoras mexicanas contemporáneas revelan cómo, aunque ya menos, la división de roles implícita en el mito del genio ha canalizado a las mujeres hacia roles creativos menos importantes. Esto, de manera cíclica, ha servido para asentar la creencia mítica de que el don de la creación musical tiende a ser un atributo masculino.

Palabras clave: compositoras, Fanny Mendelssohn, Clara Schumann, genio, compositoras mexicanas contemporáneas.

Abstract

This article discusses the influence of a simple, erroneous idea that has contributed to maintain a traditionally patriarchal reality. Drawing from the fields of musicology, myth studies, creativity studies and feminist aesthetics, it argues that the false, yet recently common notion that there have been no female composers of classical music has interacted with the gendered myth of genius to perpetuate its misleading, but self-affirmative premises.

Although the case of each female composer is unique and complex, an analysis of the lives of Fanny Mendelssohn and Clara Schumann, as well as a glance at contemporary Mexican women composers, reveal how the status-quo enhancing role division implicit in the genius myth has – albeit decreasingly – channeled women into creatively subordinate roles. This, in a cyclical manner, has helped to affirm the mythical belief that the gift of musical creativity tends to be a male attribute.

Keywords: female composers, Fanny Mendelssohn, Clara Schumann, genius, contemporary Mexican women composers.

INTRODUCTION

For centuries scholars, musicians and even those not directly concerned with music have engaged with what Eugene Gates calls “the women composer question” (Gates, 2006: 1) – a notion which, in many ways, centers around the inquiry why there have been no (or such few) female composers.

One answer to this question has tended to dominate the discussion. The relative absence of women from the musical canon has been interpreted as a seeming proof of an innate role division between females and males. Interacting with the mythology of genius which we shall discuss later on, it has acted as a sign that whereas men -

or rather, some exceptional men – were in possession of a special gift that allowed them to bring forth immortal creations, women were destined to fulfill their calling of becoming mothers and wives. Alternatively, they were allowed to access into the musical world as helpmates of a great male composer and, possibly, as performers who brought music to the people without creating it themselves.

Although previous investigations exist on the matter (Drinker, 1948; Pulido, 1958), it was largely during the last decades of the twentieth century and under the influence of feminism that answers to the women com-

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poser question started to become more complex. First of all, there was an increasing awareness of the multiple obstacles that had stood in the way of women who were inclined to compose. Apart from the fact that women's involvement with their traditional gender roles usually implied a severe lack of time for compositional activities, criticism has, for instance, paid significant attention to the frequent lack of formal musical education available for women. Mary McVicker observes in her work *Women Composers of Classical Music* how many women "worked within the confines of limited or no access to education [...] many of them worked without the means to fully develop their skills" (McVicker, 2010, loc. 42-44).² Clara Meierovich also explores how some of the most important educational institutions within the field of classical music composition showed clearly gendered patterns of training. Courses of musical theory at the renowned Leipzig Conservatory in Germany, for instance, lasted two years for women and three years for men (Meierovich, 2001: 20). Even more strikingly, the Paris Conservatory stressed in its rules that harmony, counterpoint, fugue and composition lessons in general were strictly for men (id.). Composition - especially within the field of classical music - is practically impossible without very intense, formal training. Hence, the lack of opportunities for musical learning – among other factors - goes a long way to explain the previous absence of female composers from the musical canon.

Interestingly, this already allows us to glance at the self-affirmative, cyclical power behind traditional answers to the composer question. Only men are seen capable of musical composition, wherefore only men are properly trained. As a result, men become more apt at musical composition, perpetuating the belief that women are unable to engage in this kind of (or indeed any) creativity.

Studying obstacles such as lack of education may significantly contribute to an understanding why there have been such few female composers. However, there is yet another powerful reply to this question. Namely, while it is true that many women were fully or partially hindered on their path of musical creation, there have also been numerous women who did compose, prolifically and extremely well.

Around the 1980s, the studies of "lost" female com-

posers virtually exploded and a rich alternative history of music appeared. This labor of musical archaeology produced name after name, piece after piece. Let us name a fraction of female composers that began to be re-evaluated and re-discovered: The medieval abbess, mystic, writer, teacher and composer Hildegard von Bingen (Germany, 1098-1179) (Peacock Jezic, Wood 1994: 11); Francesca Caccini (1587- approx. 1640), allegedly the first female writer of opera and the composer of the first Italian opera to be performed outside Italy (Peacock Jezic and Wood, 1994: 7-18); Barbara Strozzi (Italia, 1619-1664) who – among her eight publications – composed a volume of madrigals (McVicker, 2010, loc. 209-2013); Josephine Lang (Germany 1815-1880) who wrote songs from a very early age onward and published over 150 while still alive (Reich, 2001, loc. 3234); Florence Maud Ewart (England and Australia, 1864-1949) who wrote several operas, many of which have remained unperformed (McVicker, 2010, loc. 1648); in Mexico, the famous singer and composer of the *Album Musical* Angela Peralta (1845-1883) (Meierovich, 2001: 26) and the composer who stunned her examiners at the Mexican Conservatory of Music, Guadalupe Olmedo (1856-1896) (Vilar-Payá, 2010: 574). Their histories produced numerous works such as Diane Peacock Jezic and Elizabeth Wood's *Women Composers – A Lost Tradition Found* (1994), Mary F. McVicker's previously mentioned *Women Composers of Classical Music* (2010) and Karin Anna Pendle (ed.), *Women and Music – A History* (2001) – again, to name only a few.

However, although a lot of names have re-appeared, we often know only fragments of their biography. What is worse, a tragic number of works –for instance, many of the operas written by Francesca Caccini (Peacock Jezic, Wood, 1994: 18), or the vast majority of works of the precocious composer Maria Rosa Coccia (1759-1833) (McVicker, 2010, pos.775) – are irretrievably lost.

Despite these findings, the existence of so many women composers still does not form an integral part of common knowledge, concert programs and educational programs of music. As Sally Macarthur significantly states in her work *Towards a Twenty-First Century Politics of Music*: "A tiny amount of women's music is heard today on the concert platform, and very little of it is taught in tertiary music programs. We could say that the impact of this research has been negligible" (Macarthur, 2010: 2).

Also, a question that remains hovering above this

² "Loc." Corresponds to "location, the equivalent of "pages" in digital books in .mobi format (Amazon Kindle).

research, partially yet by no means fully explained, is how this “disappearance act” of women – amounting to a kind of cultural feminicide – could actually take place on such a massive scale. How is it possible that an essentially false account of musical history has been influential for so long?

Evidently, this has much to do with the complex workings of patriarchy in general - which is, arguably, still the prevalent system to this day. Patriarchy strongly relies on a belief in the inherent superiority of men over women, which, in turn, justifies male domination (Spender, 1982: 9).

However, I believe that this overall pattern is enhanced within the field of classical music through the mythical power underlying traditional answers to the woman composer question which subtly – and therefore even more forcefully – imply women’s innate and therefore inevitable creative inferiority. This notion of female incapacity – as Linda Nochlin already pointed out with reference to visual arts in her article “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists” (Nochlin, 1988) – is firmly based on the powerful Romantic concept of genius. The latter is not only profoundly male in its origins and connotations (Battersby 1989; Korsmeyer 2004, 2009; Pope, 2005: 105), but – as we shall see – also relies on a kind of mythical role division, channeling women into subordinate roles within or beyond the musical world such as the procreator, the helpmate and/or the performer.

In order to approach the complex matter at hand, this article is interdisciplinary in its approach, drawing extensively from the fields of musicology, myth studies, creativity studies and feminist aesthetics. Its study of the workings of the composer question and the role division implicit in the genius myth will rely chiefly on a qualitative analysis of available self-statements by different women composers, such as diary entries, letters and – in the case of our brief inquiry into the situation of the musical sphere of contemporary Mexico – interviews.

The present discussion aims to be original chiefly in its attempt to highlight the system behind the exclusion of women from becoming direct proofs of the incorrectness of the idea that there are no female composers. In other words, it strives to illustrate how through social processes such as external imposition of subordinate roles through significant others, internalization of these roles and the resultant blockages of the composition

and/or publication process, women composers were drawn into the perpetuation of their seeming absence. Furthermore, the present work highlights the *mythical* pull of the genius role division, stressing its likeliness of internalization and thus perpetuation within the field of music. Of course, much has been written about Clara Schumann and Fanny Mendelssohn. Nevertheless, there is still a considerable lack of direct and systematic analyzes of the effect of the genius myth (so particularly prevalent during musical Romanticism) on their creative development.

In its attempt to illustrate these overall workings, the present inquiry had to sacrifice, at times, detail for the sake of providing an overview. Also, the return to discussions of female composers may be seen as somewhat problematic. McClary and Aisling Kenny consider that emphasizing gender differences among composers potentially perpetuates inequality (Kenny, 2008: 51; McClary, 1999: 79). Furthermore, Kenny stresses the importance of actually discussing women’s musical works (Kenny, 2008: 54). I could not agree more with the latter – although this would be beyond this article’s scope. As to the former, I simply believe that we still have not fully grasped the system behind the oppression of women in music and, especially, the power of the composer question and the genius myth and it will go on until we accomplish it.

Many feminists have tried to prove the aesthetic value of musical work to counteract the forces behind the female composer question (Macarthur, 2010: 96). This paper takes a different approach. Somewhat controversially – but relying on works that have illustrated the immense relativity of aesthetic judgments and the systematic social construction of aesthetic value (Bourdieu, 2009; Csikszentmihalyi, 1989; Carey, 2005) – I will not discuss the quality of the composers subsequently discussed. I firmly believe in it and personally love their work; but I am also convinced of the futility of claiming their universal appeal.

What is important – and what lies at the heart of the discussion – is that music by women was often not made available enough nor was socially presented as valuable enough to allow it to be appreciated by a large public. What is more, it had to deal with firm prejudices entrenched in the tradition of the women composer question and the genius mythology, which a priori assigned an in-

ferior aesthetic status to their work (as the case of Fanny Mendelssohn supposedly writing “bad” music, for example). All of this helped to make sure that, for instance, neither Fanny Mendelssohn nor Clara Schumann could, until recently, become clear disproofs of the notion that women could not and did not compose.

The article will be structured in the following manner. The first section aims to delineate some of the basic theoretical issues underlying the argument. We will then turn to study the way the composer question and the myth of genius have interacted with the creative development of Fanny Mendelssohn and Clara Schumann. To finish off the discussion, we will briefly turn towards the lasting power of these notions with specific reference to contemporary Mexico. These cases have been chosen because they provide opportunities to analyze some of the complexities of the composer question and genius myth in operation in the past and to this day. Also, it is my objective to manifest how an overall cultural pattern became extended both in 19th century Germany and 21st century Mexico, collaborating in the process of perpetuating patriarchy within the musical field.

THE COMPOSER QUESTION AND THE GENDERED MYTH OF GENIUS

Let us begin by looking at the “women composer question” and tracing some of its most representative associations. There is no shortage of evidence that throughout history women were frequently considered inapt for musical composition in general, and with particular reference to some musical genres deemed to be most sublime, – for instance – symphonies and opera (Peacock Jezic and Wood, 1994: 3). A frequently quoted example of such oppressive stances is George Upton’s extremely successful *Women in Music* (1880) (Gates, 2006: 7; Meierovich, 2001: 17). Here, it is, for instance, claimed that: “It does not seem likely that woman will ever originate music in its fullest and grandest harmonic forms. She will always be the recipient and interpreter, but there is little hope she will be the creator” (Upton, 1880: 3).

In a comparable vein – and as highlighted also in Gates’ discussion of the woman composer question (Gates, 2006: 8) – the influential writer for the *Atlantic Monthly*, Edith Brower, declared in her article “Is the Musical Idea Masculine?”, that “dealing with the concrete makes her

[woman] a good housekeeper and manager of a family” (Bower, 1894: 338). At the same time, “It appears highly probable that, unless her nature be changed, - which Heaven forbid! - she will not in any future age excel in the art of musical composition” (Gates, 2006:339).

Both represent classical instances of how women were not only deemed by nature unfit for composition (“unless her nature be changed”) – Upton and Brower also already suggest woman’s suitability for subsidiary roles such as the “recipient”, “the interpreter” and the “good housekeeper”. In fact, all but the introductory chapter of Upton’s *Women in Music* is focused on women – and their inability to create. All other chapters discuss individual composers, like Beethoven, Chopin and Robert Schumann and the way women *helped* them make music. Clearly, the role of the “creator” is seen as destined to be fulfilled by men.³

If these are historical examples, one may add that this does not mean that the composer question and its patriarchal answer that women cannot compose, has by now disappeared. Let us glance at the article “Only Men Can Be Geniuses...But There Are Far More Stupid Men than Women” by A.N. Wilson, fairly recently published in the British newspaper *Daily Mail* as an example of this. It proclaims that women “have had their chance to excel, and in spite of well-meaning people everywhere trying to give them the chance, the female Rutherford, the female Shakespeare and the female Richard Wagner have simply not appeared” (Wilson, 2007). As a result, the author concludes that “the quality which we call genius would appear, by some ineluctable fact of nature, to be a male quality” (id.).

Once more, we see how women are declared incapable of great acts of creation in general, composition included. The woman composer question and its answer of women’s inherent inferiority – here extended to the women creator question – is again evoked to act as a proof of this. However, this quote does not only illustrate the durability of the idea of absent female creators – it also shows the direct interaction of this notion with the previously mentioned concept of genius.

In order to understand the full power of this term and the mythical thought structures underlying it, let us turn to a brief definition. According to the Concise Oxford

³ Both texts also refer to the mass of women in the singular, “woman”, as if all female creators could be classed and understood as one, congruent and homogeneous.

Dictionary “genius” refers to an “exceptional intellectual or creative power or other natural ability” and “an outstandingly intelligent or able person” (Pearsall, 2003). Many of us picture geniuses as exceptionally creative heroes – exemplified in the field of music precisely by figures such as Wagner, Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann and Mendelssohn. They are somehow believed to be born with a special gift which they employ for the sublime joy and progress of all humanity.

The term genius has an extremely long history. Referring originally to the masculine power of procreation in ancient Rome (Nitzsche, 1995: 20), it then becomes an allegorical figure in medieval writing such as Alanus de Insulis’ *De Planctu Naturae* (2005). During early Romanticism, the word increasingly takes on its definition as presented here. Numerous writers, such as Edward Young (2010), Thomas Carlyle, Immanuel Kant (2004) and Schopenhauer (2010), further develop and spread the notion that, in order to be able to create great art, one needs to be a very special person indeed, one of the chosen few with an innate gift strong enough to create immortal works of art, to be celebrated for all eternity. As Carlyle, for instance, states in his “On Heroes and Hero Worship” (1840): “The most precious gift that Heaven can give to the Earth; a man of ‘genius’ as we call it; the Soul of a Man actually sent down from the skies, with a God’s–message to us [...]. A messenger he, sent from the Infinite Unknown with tidings to us (Carlyle, 1840: 13).

The concept has been shown to be deeply gendered, even down to its very linguistic roots of acting as a god of male fertility and symbol of the male seed in ancient Rome (Nitzsche, 1975: 20). Indeed, Battersby argues in her ground-breaking work *Gender and Genius* that the term is – in very complex ways – made to fit men only; which, in turn, makes it little surprising that historically we have almost exclusively constructed male creators to fit the role of genius (Battersby, 1989). According to Carolyn Korsmeyer “genius” appears to be a category open to all those who deserve it. In practice, however – and with the exception of a few token female geniuses who falsely indicate the notion’s neutrality– it is used to refer exclusively to men (Korsmeyer, 2004: 3).

Several works within the field of creativity studies (Weisberg, 1986, 1993, 2006; Howe, 1999) have outlined how inaccurate the genius conception of the “born” artists whose eventual recognition directly reflects their

works’ inherent quality actually is. Interestingly, Margaret Boden goes so far as to realize that the notion of genius is part of a world of “myths: imaginative constructions, whose function is to express the values, assuage the fears and endorse the practices of the community that celebrates them” (Boden, 1982: 4).

Boden does not take this notion of the mythical nature of genius much further than profoundly analyzing the concept’s inherent untruth. For the sake of understanding the cyclical functioning of the women composer question and its cognitive collaboration with the concept of genius, it is crucial, however, to take the implications of its mythical status and function further than this. Does the word “myth” really apply to the idea of genius? And if it does, what is the importance of this, especially for our current inquiry?

Mircea Eliade defines myth as “a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time” which “tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence” (Eliade, 1964: 5-6). He not only views the cosmogony of every culture as the very basis and origin of all subsequent myths (ibid.: 21), but also explains the powerful influence of myth on human behavior, acting as an “exemplary model for all significant human activities” (ibid., 1964: 6).

This view has been recently confirmed by the neuromythologist John Teske, who argues that myths actually have an impact on the way we structure our identity, relationships and social interactions (Teske, 2006: 169). Furthermore – and of great importance to our present discussion – Teske highlights the tendency of myths to “come in two”: “There are always two characters, though we may see ourselves in either role, such as the stories of Psyche and Eros, Pygmalion and Galatea, Orpheus and Eurydice” (Teske, 2006:192).

Several scholars have indicated that myths rarely tend to deeply undermine society and its basic values. On the contrary, as Malinowski (1974), Kirk (1970) and Barthes have stated, they often act as powerful ways to uphold the status quo and stabilize existent social structures and values. Indeed, Barthes argues that the chief function of myths is to “immobilize the world” (Barthes, 1972: 155); thus the claim that genius provides a mythical framework which enhances the cyclical power behind the woman composer question.

Yet what is mythical about the concept of genius? At

the first glance, there may be nothing that strikes one as implying the presence of a myth. Once one looks closer at the matter, however, genius subtly adheres to almost all of the mythical elements previously mentioned. First of all, even though it seems to be merely an idea, it actually provides a narrative pattern artists may rely upon, generally describing a “genius story” that contains a life full of mysterious inspirations on the one hand and multiple sufferings such as rejection, poverty and even insanity on the other (Chibici-Revneanu, 2011). In the end, the true genius is rewarded by glorious immortality through fame.

Consequently, we seem to be facing a “history” which is both secular (it implies only a worldly form of transcendence) and “sacred”. Also, remembering Carlye’s typical vision of genius as “the Soul of a Man actually sent down from the skies” (Carlyle, 1840: 13), we can see that these narratives involve “Supernatural Beings” that, through their artistic creations and innovations, bring “a reality into existence” (Eliade, 1964: 5-6). In addition, the myth of genius is subtly, yet intricately related to the Biblical creation myth (Weisberg, 1993: 7). However, it is now man, not god, who is capable of creating things that are new.

This leads us to one of the key differences between Eliade’s conception of myth and the notion of genius. Whereas the former regards myths as taking place in some remote, “primordial” time, the genius stories record the outstanding deeds achieved in our historical past. Yet rather than minimizing their mythical nature, I believe this difference highlights the function of genius to celebrate the creations and creative capacities no longer of god, but of human beings. Unfortunately, as we have seen, it seems that genius not so much celebrates the great innovative potential of all humanity, but specifically of *man*-kind.

Let us, at this point, return to Teske’s observation that myth always “comes in two” (Teske, 2006: 92). Even though the genius narrative *appears* to be gender neutral, a profound, mythical gender division providing separate paths for women and men to follow and emulate lies at its very core. This is true from its very linguistic origins, where “genius” as the masculine god of fertility is complemented by the feminine goddess of procreation, “Juno” (Nitzsche, 1975: 11). When Genius becomes an allegorical figure in medieval literature it

is often completed by the figure of Nature (de Insulis, 2005). In its crystallization during early Romanticism, the term begins to implicitly take on a set of alternative female counter-parts.

Among these complementary roles one finds, for instance, the image of women as muses for male artists (Murray, 2006), or as subject matter for artistic works (Woolf, 1992: 33). Of particular interest at the moment, however, are the roles of the procreator, the performer and the helpmate.

With regard to the former, we have already seen that, in its origins, the myth of genius actually refers to the process of procreation. As it further develops, the idea of physical procreation becomes increasingly transformed into a metaphor for artistic gestation and artists giving life to immortal works of art. In this manner, the procreation of mortal human beings becomes the appropriate domain for women, whereas forms transcendent creations are powerfully associated with men (Weigle, 1989: 135).

Moving specifically into the field of music, it was also deemed suitable for (some) women to play the “mortal” role of performing works (Pendle, 2001: 149; Vilar-Payá, 2010: 573). Interestingly, even Upton acknowledges this when he refers to woman as suitably becoming “the interpreter”. Yet it is the privilege of man to engage – to use his words with regard to Beethoven – in this “battle with Fate; and winning immortality” (Upton, 1890: 83).

Finally, if not conclusively, the notion of genius – in direct relation to the biblical creation myth where Eve is defined as Adam’s helpmate (Holland, 2006: 112) – appears to channel women into the role of dedicated assistants who participate in a man’s path towards recognition. They may do so by simply becoming, in the words of Brower, a “good housekeeper” (1894: 338). Also, their help may take the form of directly assisting men’s creativity, by acting as their inspirations and/or the performers or editors of their work. Upton identifies this helpmate role as suitable for women, emphasizing that woman “has, in numerous instances, been their [great composer’s] impulse, support, and consolation” (Upton, 1890: 32). Indeed, history is full with stories of such self-sacrificing “women behind genius” (Wilkinson, 2007: 20). As Battersby recounts in her work *Gender and Genius*, the notion is so common that when she offered a conference on “Women and genius”, many students

were confused and wondered “‘What could the argument be? After all, not all geniuses had wives or girlfriends!’” (Battersby, 1989: 15).

It is my claim, then, that these role divisions do not necessarily originate with but are codified by the concept of genius and have functioned as models and guides, organizing processes surrounding human “creations” on a personal and, especially, interpersonal level. Like the biblical myth of Adam and Eve, the myth of genius promotes a metaphysically sanctioned division of labor.⁴ Often internalized, this division helps men and women structure their mythical vision of others and themselves, seeking to occupy and, if necessary, push others into life paths which they believe were ordained for them.

The mythical nature of this division becomes significant in part because its implicit reference to a “higher” reality enhances its power to impose itself. Merely social structures may be seen as subjects to change; mythical structures, on the other hand, make us believe they are beyond our questioning, destined and determined. This vision goes beyond the view of men as the source of intended oppression. As implied, mythical structures of society have clearly been endorsed by both men and women, pushing themselves or others into their corresponding roles, without considering this an act of potential harm but a contribution to an organization of life like it is meant to be. This does not excuse oppressive behavior, of course. But it does explain its pervasive, self-perpetuating, structure-enhancing force.

Having outlined these basic operations of the myth of genius traditionally working behind the woman composer question, let us now turn to look at how these have affected individual lives, and most particularly those of Fanny Mendelssohn and Clara Schumann. Both composers had the privilege of an excellent musical education, which probably goes a long way to explain why they are not part of the masses of women who “wanted to write music but were discouraged, forbidden or subtly channeled into other, more ‘womanly’ paths of life or detoured even before they arrived at the point of knowing they wanted to compose” (Citron, 2000: 44).

Furthermore, it is interesting to recognize the extent to which – somewhat paradoxically – we probably know

much more about these two women composers *because* of the idea of genius. After all, Fanny Mendelssohn was the sister and Clara Schumann the wife of the “genius” creators Felix Mendelssohn and Robert Schumann, respectively. Largely as a result of the interest in these men (as well as Johannes Brahms, with whom Clara Schumann had a very intense friendship), a lot of the music, diary writing and letters of these two women have survived.

At the same time, the notion of genius with its underlying role division was powerfully imposed on both women and internalized to an extent that it appears to have acted as a decisive factor in both women making their music external and well-known enough to prove the absurdity of the idea that women are naturally incapable of composing great works.

CASE STUDY 1: FANNY MENDELSSOHN

Fanny Mendelssohn – also known as Fanny Hensel, Fanny Mendelssohn-Bartholdy or Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel – was born on the 14th November 1805 in Hamburg, Germany. She was the first of four children by Abraham Mendelssohn and Lea Solomon Mendelssohn. She and her siblings received a very complete education, including intense musical training from a very young age onward. Fanny was very close to her four-year younger brother, Felix. In 1829 Fanny married the painter Wilhelm Hensel. Together they had one son, Sebastian. Even though confined chiefly to domestic life, Fanny tirelessly created and promoted music, among other activities organizing regular Sunday performances in her own home which became one of the key cultural events in Berlin. Even though she composed over 450 pieces, only some of her creations – predominantly piano pieces and Lieder – were published (Todd, 2010: X). She died of a sudden stroke on the 14th of May 1847.

During the past decades a considerable number of works about Fanny Mendelssohn have been produced, including not only biographical studies such as those by Francoise Tillard and Reinhard G. Pauly (1996) and Larry Todd (2010) but also several biographical novels as those by Peter Härtling (2011) and Thea Derado (2005) – to name only a few. One particularly interesting – if controversial – work is Marian Wilson Kimber’s article “The ‘suppression’ of Fanny Mendelssohn: Re-thinking

⁴ For centuries, scholars of the Bible have evoked the biblical creation myth of Eve being created out of Adam and seducing him towards the path of evil, as well as god’s declaration that woman is to suffer from childbirth and man from his labor to codify and justify the role division between men and women (Holland, 2006: 84).

Feminist biography” which explores how many of the more recent “stories” about Fanny focus on her role as a victim powerfully oppressed by her father and brother Felix, resulting in Fanny’s relative silence and long absence from musical history.

Wilson Kimber opens the ground for a refreshing re-analysis of Fanny Mendelssohn’s life. She, for instance, illustrates how Felix was not necessarily the envious, musically exploitative brother he has often been portrayed as (Wilson Kimber, 2002: 120). Indeed, a discussion of the impact of the woman composer question and the mythology of genius traditionally underlying it, will make clear how Fanny was neither simply a victim, nor was Felix either innocent or evil. Arguably, Fanny, Felix and their father were all influenced by the exemplary models of musical creation the genius image provided. As a result, they followed and coerced others as well as themselves into roles they believed they were – mythically – meant to fulfill.

Despite the fact that one should therefore neither demonize Fanny’s father (who enabled her training) nor Felix (with whom she did have, throughout her life, fruitful discussions on music), they were both crucial agents in her socialization towards an acceptance of the life path division underlying the genius myth.⁵ To illustrate this, one may – first of all – mention two letters which Abraham Mendelssohn sent to his daughter. When Fanny was fourteen years old, he wrote that: “Music will perhaps become his [Felix’s] profession, while for you it can and must only be an ornament, never the root of your being and doing” (Citron, 1987: xl). The other, which Fanny received at the age of twenty-two contains a very similar message: “You must prepare more earnestly and eagerly for your real calling, the only calling of a young woman – I mean the state of a housewife.” (id.). Clearly, Fanny Mendelssohn was directed by her father into the artistically subsidiary role of the procreator and helpmate, seen – in subtly mythical terms (“calling”) that allow for little contradiction.

Another example of outward pressures aimed at enforcing the metaphysically ordained role division is a letter Felix sent to Fanny soon after the latter had given birth

to her son Sebastian, worrying that her creative drive might have been affected by motherhood:

you cannot expect a man of my caliber to wish you musical ideas; it is only insatiability that makes you complain about your lack of them; per bacco, if you really felt like it, you would be able to compose (compare yourself to a travelling musician or Felix in Rome) and if you do not feel like it, why does it make you so angry? [...] But honestly, the child is not even six months old, and you already want to have ideas that are not related to Sebastian (not Bach). Rejoice in having him, because music only remains absent when it is not in the right place, and it does not surprise me that you are not a bad mother. (Felix Mendelssohn, 1830, in Weissweiler, 1997:129).

Felix evidently chides Fanny for wanting to create, now that she has taken on the role of the procreator. This becomes particularly explicit through his allusion to the child’s name and how Fanny is only supposed to think of him, not of the symbol of outstanding musical achievement (Johann Sebastian Bach) he was consciously named after. Also, Felix invokes the mythical incompatibility between motherhood and composition when he emphasizes that “music is only absent when it’s not in its right place” – as if music had a will of its own which in itself obeys the male-female role-division. This is even further strengthened by his stressing that *not* having musical ideas makes Fanny a good mother. In fact, in the German original he says that Fanny is not a “Rabenmutter”, literally a “raven mother” – a highly stigmatized German expression for selfish, even possibly evil mothers who neglect their children. Again, then, we can see how Fanny was guided and gently told off, so her adherence to traditional feminine roles could be re-enforced.

A final – if not conclusive - instance of this process at work may be found in Fanny’s well-known struggles with publication. Fanny – differently from Clara Schumann, as we shall see – composed music throughout her life. Nevertheless, albeit encouraged both by her husband and her mother, she had serious reservations about publishing her work. This seems to have been enhanced by Felix’s lack of support which, in turn, gained force through the fact that his opinion was extremely crucial to Fanny. Their mother, aware of Fanny’s reliance on Felix’ opinion, actually sent Felix a letter in 1837, asking for his help with the words: “That you haven’t requested

⁵ In fact, it has been argued that the restrictions imposed on Fanny were even more intense, because of a stricter adherence to traditional roles for women within the social class she belonged to (Malin, 2010: 70).

and encouraged her to do it - this alone holds her back. Wouldn't it therefore be appropriate for you to encourage her and help her find a publisher?" (Solomon Mendelssohn, in Citron, 1987: xli).

Felix replies in a now famous letter, in keeping with the mythical role division of genius:

From my knowledge of Fanny I should say that she has neither inclination nor vocation for authorship. She is too much all that a woman ought to be for this. She regulates her house, and neither thinks of the public nor of the musical world, nor even of music at all until her first duties are fulfilled. Publishing would only disturb her in these, and I cannot say that I approve of it (Mendelssohn in Gates, 2007: 9).

It is true – as Wilson Kimber points out and “accusers” of Felix have often overlooked – that Felix did make an explicit plea to their mother *not to show* this letter to Fanny (Vicent, 2003: 3). Also, he gave her a kind of – belated – blessing after Fanny anxiously informed him that she had decided to publish her work, without his help. Still, the letter clearly expresses Felix's firm and influential conviction that being a woman and a published composer are two largely incompatible things. There is thus significant evidence that illustrates how strongly Fanny Mendelssohn was pushed into the subsidiary mythical roles as implicitly prescribed by the myth of genius by people very close and important to her.

However, as we shall also see in the case of Clara Schumann, the full power of these external impositions only seems to become activated upon their internalization. The mythical force and appeal of the role division is crucial here. Let us remember that they represent deeply influential narratives that help shape identity, interactions and projected life paths to be followed, “naturally” appropriate tasks to be carried out.

One clear sign of this internalization, then, is Fanny's overall – if not complete - obedience to the roles she was assigned to. She married and lived close to the Mendelssohn family throughout her entire life.⁶ Even more notable is her previously alluded to hesitance about publication which may be directly interpreted as a symptom of her assimilation of the mythical role division. As a result, despite having composed from a very young age onward, her Opus 1 was not released for publication until

⁶ Even though this, too, was not without a struggle, as her father imposed a separation of several years between Fanny and her betrothed before they were allowed to marry.

she was forty years old (Derado, 2005, loc. 69).

While there is evidence that Fanny was often very happy with domestic life (Hensel, 2002: 27, 34), it is also clear that she suffered artistically from her relative professional isolation (Büchter-Römer, 2002: 4). In addition, she very much feared composing larger musical genres which – as indicated - were thought of as traditionally masculine (Gates, 2007: 8). According to her, “I am lacking a certain life principle and as a result my lengthy works die during their youth of decrepitude; I do not have the strength to hold onto my ideas properly and give them the consistency they need” (Fanny Mendelssohn, 1835, in Weissweiler, 1997:188).

We thus see a clear socialization into her ordained role as a procreator which led to both domestic joy and professional sufferings; we have also glanced at how profoundly Fanny seems to have endorsed the role that was socially and “mythically” assigned to her. Most importantly for our present discussion, however, it seems that both the actions and reactions of the Mendelssohn family, as well as society at large, contributed to the perpetuated plausibility of traditional answers to the women composer question, without Fanny gaining enough recognition to lastingly disproof conceived notions about the normative masculinity of the musical genius.

CASE STUDY 2: CLARA SCHUMANN

Clara Wieck was born in Leipzig, Germany on the 19th of September 1819. She was the daughter of the famous music teacher (and music businessman) Friedrich Wieck and the musician Marianne Tromlitz. After her parent's divorce, Clara was assigned to her father's care when she was five years old (Litzmann, 2013 c1913: loc. 517). Her father took very seriously the task he had assigned himself even before his child's birth – to turn her into a virtuoso musician. As a result, Clara received extensive musical training from a very early age and started successfully performing a solo concert at the prestigious *Gewandhaus* in Leipzig when she was no more than nine years old. The same year, she wrote her first piano compositions. In 1840, after a court trial to counter-act her father's opposition, Clara married her father's former pupil Robert Schumann. Together, they had eight children. After his mental health was steadily decreasing, Robert tried to kill himself in 1854. He did not succeed, yet died

in a mental hospital two years after his attempt. After his death, Clara was in charge of maintaining their children. She toured and taught extensively – the latter until her death in Frankfurt on the 20th of September 1896. Whereas Clara Schumann obtained extensive recognition as one of “the leading pianists of Europe” (Reich, 2013, loc. 6134), her compositions have only been rewarded with more attention as part of the recovery process of women’s work.

A significant number of works – academic writing (Reich 1987, 2013; Gates 2009; Litzmann 2013 c1913 etc.), novels (Galloway, 2001) and even films (“Geliebte Clara”, Sanders–Brahms 2008) - centered on Clara Schumann, her relationship with the two acknowledged “geniuses” Robert Schumann and Johannes Brahms, as well as her life as a performer and composer. Most interesting to us at the moment is the complex way in which her life – in some ways even more than that of Fanny Mendelssohn – was influenced by the genius myth, its role division and direct interaction with the woman composer question.

As it can already be glimpsed from the biographical overview, Clara Schumann had a highly unusual childhood, being pushed by her father into performing across Europe as an intensely celebrated musical prodigy. Despite the fact that one may be ethically concerned about the pressure Wieck exerted over his daughter (apparently driven above all by his financial interest in her musical development), he must nonetheless be understood as a crucial enabler of Clara Schumann’s creative growth. Interestingly, Wieck’s ambition appears to have been partly instigated by his endorsement yet re-interpretation of the woman composer question. Aware of the relative absence of women from the professional music sphere, he recognized the commercial possibilities of having a *girl* compose and give virtuoso performances (Litzmann, 2013 c1913: loc 535-6). In probable relation to this, Clara – at first – seemed to have little qualms about her active musical role. As such, she – for instance – presented one of her compositions to none other than Paganini when she was only eleven years old (Steegmann and Rieger, 1996: 39).

When Clara married Robert Schumann, the latter also seems to act as a crucial figure that permitted and even urged his wife not to give up her compositional work. In fact, many of her songs were explicitly written due to Robert’s request and because Clara wanted to do him a

favor. As Clara regarded her husband extremely highly, indeed considering him a great genius, this encouragement seems to have gone a long way in its capacity to weaken the socially dominant mythical rules about women and composition.

Hence, several elements such as Clara’s thorough education, her permission by significant others to break some of the basic rules of genius rule division and, of course, her individual capacity crucially facilitated Clara’s creative output. Unfortunately, this does not mean that she remained unharmed by the effect of the dominant rhetoric behind the woman composer question.

Both Clara’s father and Robert Schumann may be most accurately perceived as highly ambiguous figures who acted as significant enablers *and* oppressors. Friedrich Wieck provided his daughter with extraordinary opportunities for musical growth, but, as a result, arguably placed excessive demands on a child. Robert Schumann encouraged Clara to compose; but he also, actively, hindered her, as we will now see.

Robert Schumann himself seems to have aligned himself very strongly with the masculine role model of genius, throwing himself into his work, regardless of the implications of this both for his physical and, especially, psychological health. In the same manner, he also appeared to have few reservations about putting the demands of his creative needs far above those of Clara who – through the birth of their many children – became pushed into a woman’s subordinate mythical roles. One well-known example is the fact that, even though both Clara and Robert possessed a piano, Schumann was highly sensitive to Clara using hers while he was composing (Gates, 2009: 3). Also, the traditionally feminine roles kept Clara so busy that she, for instance, complained in their shared marriage diary (a classic edition of which was, incidentally, published simply as Robert’s writing): “As dedicated as Robert is to his art, as little I do for mine. Heaven knows! there are always and always distractions. And, as small as our home is, there is always something to do in it [...] there is nothing I can do about my composing. All poetry has left me” (Schumann, 1841 in Nauhaus, 1987).

It is interesting how this prioritization of Robert’s creative needs (which, incidentally, he also felt guilty about)⁷

⁷ Robert Schumann was aware that “too often she [Clara] has to buy my songs at the price of silence and invisibility.” (Litzmann, 2013 c1913: loc. 6555).

over Clara's came to be interpreted. Whereas modern-day analyses tend to see this precisely as a sign of oppression (Gates, 2009: 3), it may help us understand the full social presence and force of the genius myth to look at the view of Berthold Litzmann, Clara's early biographer, on the matter. As he states in Volume I in his classic *Clara Schumann: An Artist's Life Based on Material Found in Diaries and Letters*:

She [Clara] realised and learnt a new day by day in her life with Schumann, that he had reached his highest point of development as an artist, that he was the master, not only of his life's companion, but of his fellow-artist, and that it was at once her highest duty and her highest happiness to lose herself in him (Litzmann, 2013 c1913: loc.6402-6404).

Here, the fact that Clara brought much of her musical work to a halt to enable that of her husband is not interpreted as a dreadful loss but – much in tune with the mythical role division – a laudable acceptance of “her highest duty and her highest happiness” because Robert Schumann acted as her creative superior (“master”).

Still, Clara's countless alternative duties did not act as the only impediment to her compositional output. Even more than Fanny Mendelssohn, Clara Schumann was an avid believer in the mythology of genius, conceiving many men around her – especially Robert Schumann and Johannes Brahms – in these terms. To name only two of many possible examples of this, Clara Schumann wrote in her diary: “these compositions, this execution and all these marvels through my Robert! my admiration of his genius, of his spirit, indeed of the whole composer grows with every piece” (Schumann, 1842 in Nauhaus, 1987: 245) and declared how “genius goes untroubled on its way, and follows its god alone. – Such a genius is Brahms” (Schumann in Litzmann, Vol. II. 2013 c1913: loc. 1431). However, as she enters womanhood, the “fact” that this is essentially a male category apparently began to dawn on her.

Numerous writers have commented about Clara's intense struggles with her low levels of self-esteem and doubts in her creative capacities (Reich, 2013: loc.1906, 1910; Steegmann and Rieger, 1996:21). Most explicative of Clara's condition is, perhaps, a famous diary entry (1839) which marks both the descent of her self-confidence and – most importantly for this article – its connection to the false notion that there have not been any great women

composers:

I once thought that I possessed creative talent, but I have given up this idea; a woman must not desire to compose – not one has been able to do it, and why should I expect to? It would be arrogance, though indeed, my Father led me into it in earlier days (Schumann in Litzmann, 2013: loc. 5555).

Despite Clara's counter-socialization through her father (“my Father led me into it”), she started to see herself in terms of the metaphysical framework of the genius myth and its underlying notion that “woman must not desire to compose”, thus discarding the belief in her own creative abilities⁸. Hence, we see not only her adoption of the mythical role division, but also its strong connection to the woman composer question.

If we have thus illustrated Clara's powerful insecurity about her creative capacity and how this began to increasingly interfere with her compositional activity, Clara – with the apparent exception of one piece written for a friend – actually *stopped* writing music after her husband's death. Several interpretations may be provided for this fact. On the one hand, it is fairly self-evident that being left to take care of eight children, Clara had little choice but to take on this new expansion of her “procreative” role and to also start providing for them through her countless concerts and teaching engagements. For Nancy Reich, it was the absence of Robert Schumann and his encouraging interventions which made Clara stop (Reich, 2013: loc. 1975-1978). One may certainly suspect Clara's insecurity to have played a significant role in her withdrawal from composition.

It seems likely that all of these factors had a strong impact on Clara Schumann and her eventual silencing. Nonetheless, it also appears that a strong engagement with and re-interpretation of the mythical help-mate role underpinned a complete move away from composition and towards her dedication to the distribution of her dead husband's work. In order to illustrate this, let us turn to a reply Clara wrote to her friend Brahms (1868) when he worried about her numerous performances and concert tours: “I feel a calling for the reproduction of beautiful works, especially those of Robert, as long as

8 This lack of self-esteem would not be such a serious matter, if we did not know from various scholars that faith in one's own capacities – possibly even more than actual capacities – play a decisive role in creative development (Bandura, 1994; Wolson, 1995).

I have the strength” (Steedmann and Rieger, 1996: 80)⁹. Note again the mysterious terminology (“called upon”) Clara evokes to explain her endorsement of the subordinate mythical role of the re-producer, not producer of “beautiful” works. This, in turn, actively promoted and helped to establish the notion of Schumann (and Brahms, whose works she also extensively performed) as extraordinary geniuses throughout Europe - whereas the image of Clara Schumann became established as that of a performer, not a composer, in people’s minds.¹⁰

Again then, we have seen how – despite various “attenuating circumstances” which arguably made her compositions possible – Clara Schuman’s creative development was crucially hindered by the social currency of the metaphysically ordained role division implicit in the concept of genius. This, in turn, enhanced the cyclical effectiveness of the myth, as – until recently – Clara Schumann was also unavailable as proof that a belief in the maleness of all outstanding composers constitutes a dangerously erroneous vision of musical history.

CONTEMPORARY MEXICO

I would like to finish this work with a tentative glance at what is happening in today’s world with regard to the women composer question and the myth of genius in contemporary Mexico. This final section is intended, more than anything, as both a brief overview and a call for future research – as Yael Bitrán observes in her article “Compositoras al habla”, the question of women in Mexican music has been hitherto consigned to “colossal obscurity” (Bitrán, 2001: 142).

Of course, there are notable scholarly exceptions to this lack of “light shed” onto the field. Two classic examples are Esperanza Pulido’s “La mujer mexicana en la música” (1958) and Yolanda Moreno’s *La composición en México en el siglo XX* (1994). But there have also been other important efforts such as Vilar-Paya’s “La mujer mexicana como creadora e investigadora de la música de concierto del siglo XX y principios del siglo XXI”, Clara

Meierovich’s *Mujeres en la creación musical de México*, Elvira García’s “Cinco compositoras mexicanas” and García Bonilla’s *Visiones Sonoras - Entrevistas con compositores, solistas y directores*, to name only some of the works most relevant to our present discussion.

Apart from showing an interest in various historical female creators such as Angela Peralta and Guadalupe Olmedo previously mentioned, many of these sources also manifest a marked concern with contemporary Mexican women composers. Several of these investigations are based on qualitative interviews which in fact provide the chief content of *Visiones Sonoras*, as well as Meierovich’s and García’s publication. As these interviews may be considered a rich source of primary information regarding the situation of contemporary female composers in Mexico which has, so far, barely been analyzed, I have decided to grant them a central place in my present discussion.

Overall, the contemporary scene of Mexican music displays both notable improvement and significant ambiguity with regard to the woman composer question and the genius mythology. On the one hand, the days of rigidly enforced gender limits in music seem to have largely disappeared. On the other, some traditional and, above all, less overt discriminatory practices strike one as remarkably persistent, often continuing despite a common belief in the present-day absence of gender exclusion.

Let us look at these assertions in somewhat more detail. To begin with, the interviews published in García, García Bonilla and Meierovich all attest to significant changes that have taken place within regard to women’s traditional role assignments. One already finds a first indication of this in the sheer number of active women composers: even Meierovich’s questioning of seventeen composers represents only a part of all the women currently creating music in Mexico.

More importantly, however, there is a strong tendency among the majority of the women interviewed to claim that discriminatory practices against women composers in Mexico¹¹ is a phenomenon of the past. When asked by Elvira García whether it was difficult for her as a woman to find her place in Mexican contemporary music, Marcela Rodríguez (Mexico City, 1951) replied that “this

⁹ All translations from sources written in a language other than English are mine.

¹⁰ Indeed, even before their marriage Clara started to act as an important enabler of Robert’s fame. As the following excerpt from a letter from Clara to Robert illustrates, she both recognized his “genius” and the demands of the public, trying to reconcile both to achieve his success: “I should so much like to have something of yours to play at concerts, something suited to the general public. It is indeed humiliating for a genius, but policy sometimes demands it” (Schumann in Litzmann, 2013 c1913, pos. 4714).

¹¹ Interestingly, one also comes across the repeatedly expressed notion that women composers in Mexico are less oppressed than their European or US-American counterparts.

country is wonderful. Mexican women have been very lucky. They perform works created by women more than in other nations” (García, 1997). Hilda Paredes (Tehuacán, Puebla, 1957) answered the same question by claiming that there was no notable discrimination “at this moment. There are always commentaries and stupidities by people not worth taking into consideration. But we are living in other times, the difficulties for women are not related to music [...] At the moment, there are many female composers and this is something to be applauded.” (García, 1997).

In a comparable manner, when queried by Meierovich whether she thought there were any particular difficulties women composers had to face, especially with regard to making their work known, Graciela de Elías (Mexico City, 1944) affirmed: “I don’t think there are any obstacles because we are women, not at all” (in Meierovich, 2001: 141).

This optimistic attitude is repeated also in Bonilla García’s study, where the question whether the interviewees believed that female composers faced advantages or disadvantages in Mexico, typically received replies like “I think it would not be very credible to say in our days that there is any kind of disadvantage because of being a woman” (García in García Bonilla, 2001: 77) and “the advantages and disadvantages presently seem to be the same for men and women” (Álvarez in García Bonilla: 76)

Given all this evidence, one may be tempted to presume that the kind of problems Fanny Mendelssohn and Clara Schumann had to deal with are by now only of historical interest. However, whereas much of this improvement seems real, there are also several elements which point towards lasting difficulties, often directly or indirectly connected to the women composer question and the genius myth.

Let us start with the example of Leticia Armijo (Mexico City, 1961). During her interview with Meierovich she recounts that when she was a student, only boys’ works were performed because they were considered “geniuses” (Armijo in Meierovich, 2001: 109). Also, she recalls how their music teachers told them that they would rather teach the boys because: “You are a woman, you will marry and have children” (Armijo in Meierovich, 2001: 111). Indeed, she explains how composition teachers evoked the mythical system beneath the woman

composer question to justify their discriminatory practices: “Up until today, I don’t know a number of works by women as large and monumental as those produced by Mozart and Bach” (Armijo in Meierovich, 2001).

Graciela Agudelo (Mexico City, 1945) shares the view expressed by so many female composers that men now usually acknowledge women as their creative and intellectual equals (Agudelo in Meierovich, 2001: 65). What worries her is that many female composers strike her as perpetuating their own oppression. In fact, she remembers how working on several committees that called for participation in artistic projects, she noticed a strong pattern of “self-marginalization among women” (i Agudelo in Meierovich, 2001: 67). As a result, she “even created a statistics about it once [...] and, indeed, it turns out that the number of men who apply [for participation in projects] is disproportionately larger than that of women” (Agudelo in Meierovich, 2001: 67). What this points towards – and arguably calls for further investigations – is the extent to which significant patterns of internalized oppression hindering creative development and the distribution of works by female composers seem to persist in our own times.

Indeed, during the Meierovich interviews with Lucía Álvarez (Mexico City, 1948) one can detect clear signs of the composer’s internalization of the women composer question and its underlying role division. In a manner not unlike Clara Schumann, she illustrates a certain endorsement of the idea that there have been no outstanding women composers and depicts the resultant suspicion of women’s inherent creative inferiority. As she states:

With regard to female creativity, we have much better female writers than composers. So, I wonder – beyond all forms of repression that exists – if there is a desire to create, one creates, so what has happened to the musical production of women? There is no example of any women at the heights of Bach, why? Has our social condition or something else been inhibiting us? Even though women have been historically considered as being curious, I realize that men are more curious than women (Álvarez in Meierovich, 2001: 93).

Here, we observe how Álvarez battles with the seeming absence of women composers from the musical cannon, which leads her to a consideration of the numerous obstacles women had to face (“all the repression”, “social

condition”), but ultimately – if subtly – arriving at the conclusion that women may be lacking some inherent capacity (“men are more curious”).

Hence, it is not surprising when Álvarez – both in her Meierovich and García Bonilla interview – manifests as certain belief that men may be both creators and procreators, whereas women’s priority naturally guides them towards their “natural” role as a procreator. After affirming that men and women in music tend to face the same advantages and disadvantages, she adds: “even so, it seems that men are still able to embark on more audacious enterprises and that they can move with greater liberty, because – in cases of maternity – women composers find themselves restricted regarding the use of their time. Men – whether married or not – are always free” (Álvarez in García Bonilla, 2001: 76).

That she views this as a difference of nature rather than nurture may be glanced from her opinion that: “Many of us women composers are mothers and above all creation, the most important thing for a woman, is that fact of being a mother (Lucía Álvarez in Meierovich, 2001: 95). Note her use of the singular (“for a woman”) and its implications that this prioritization of procreation over creation (and not, for instance, a coexistence of both on an equal level) as a basic for all women. Clearly then, this is an instance of how the roles of procreator and helpmate are lastingly regarded as interfering with women’s creative activities.

Before finishing off this brief analysis of contemporary Mexico, I would also like to draw attention to two instances where the genius mythology appears to be perpetuated in a more subtle and ambiguous manner. To begin with, I was struck by a seeming lack of appreciation among the female composers interviewed of *other* women composers. Even though there are exceptions to this (Armijo in García Bonilla, 2001: 86; in Meierovich, 2001: 111) many of the women questioned list only male names as their influences and favourite composers.

When Graciela Agudelo was asked about her favourite composers, she answered: “I have many favourites from different epochs and places [...] There is nothing comparable to the majesty of Bach, and yet, the geniality, the ‘divine touch’ of Mozart is unique” (Agudelo in Meierovich, 2001: 61). She then goes on to name a great number of other composers (Beethoven, Brahms, Villa-Lobos, Revueltas, Ginastera, etc.) (Ibid.: 62), displaying

a profound knowledge of European and Latin American creators – but not a single female composer is mentioned (Ibid.: 63).

María Granillo (Torreón, Coahuila, 1962) replied to the same question by commenting that she used to be a pianist and learned a lot from “Bach, Mussorgsky, Ravel”.¹² Again, as the conversation continues, a considerable number of other composers such as Schoenberg, Scriabin and Xenakis are mentioned implying a sophisticated knowledge of other composers – without, however, referring to a single woman.

One reason for this absence of women from these composers’ personal musical cannon may be that they happen not to be very impressed by other female composers. But I strongly suspect that this situation is also partially caused by what was mentioned towards the beginning of this article as the enormous short-comings regarding the inclusion of female composers - their lives and their work - into common musical knowledge and education.

This possible lack of information may, at first, appear to be of little consequence. But – taking seriously the notion of scholars such as Albert Bandura (1994) that people tend to often base their self-esteem on seeing what others like themselves have or have not been able to achieve –, it may also be regarded as a powerful, if subliminal stumbling block, partially responsible for women’s continued self-marginalization as analyzed by Agudelo herself. In other words, they may still fall prey, at least indirectly, to the woman composer question and the idea that, at least historically, female musicians have not had what it takes.

Nonetheless – and this is the second and final example of ambiguous discriminatory practices – it is not only the women themselves who keep an underlying sense of male musical predominance alive. To illustrate this, let us turn once more towards the collection of interviews with composers contained by García Bonilla’s *Visiones Sonoras*. At a first glance, the book makes a very laudable effort to illustrate the gender-neutrality of musical capacity, always mentioning male and female composers and even interviewing a greater number of female than male musical creators (García Bonilla, 2001: 12). Still, all of the twelve male composers questioned are granted the space of an individual chapter, whereas the thirteen women

¹² Indeed, she added that she forever kept studying Bach, to which Meierovich replied: “Who is the father of all” (in Meierovich, 2001: 186) – arguably evoking the ancient association of the male genius with procreative and later artistic fatherhood

are contained by a single one entitled “El arte sin sexo”.

Evidently, I do not mean to imply that this presents a deliberate form of discrimination. Indeed, it may have been for entirely practical reasons that the book is structured in this manner. Nevertheless, the subliminal message remains that great individuality and importance is granted to the male “genius” composer, whereas women may be grouped together, as a continuing “other” which – nevertheless – has started to acquire some speaking power within the musical field.

CONCLUSION

In the course of this paper we have looked at the question why there have been such few or no women composers of classical music and the underlying, gendered mythology of genius which tends to both externally and internally channel women into artistically subordinate roles. Whereas musically inclined women may become the supporter of creators (in the figure we here called the “helpmate”) or the producers of mortal beings and manifestations (both bringing forth children and performing music), only men are usually assigned the role of outstanding producers of immortal works of art. This system of thought has been shown to influence and cause creative difficulties in the lives of two of the now most recognized female composers, Fanny Mendelssohn and Clara Schumann, as well as - albeit often in a highly assuaged or indirect manner - among some contemporary Mexican female creators of music.

Whereas one must never forget that individual lives are far more complex than can be presented in such brief biographical accounts, it has been manifested with regard to Fanny Mendelssohn and Clara Schumann that both were enabled to compose their works not only through their own initiative, but also through certain “attenuating circumstances” not available to other musically inclined women, such as a thorough musical education and significant others who encouraged their productions. At the same time, some of their problems with composition, exemplified by Fanny’s great fear of publication and Clara’s increasing lack of confidence in her own creative abilities, can be clearly traced to the gendered myth of genius and the role division the latter implies. This, in turn, has been shown to perpetuate this system of mythical oppression, making it impossible for Clara

Schumann and Fanny Mendelssohn to become, without the necessity of subsequent discovery, significant examples of women’s direct access to main roles within the history of music.

Of course, one may object that the power and influence of the myth of genius and its role division behind the woman composer question was such that, even if both women had not been partially inhibited from composing more and, especially, exposing their work more widely, its foundation could not have been shaken. There is considerable proof for this supposition. In fact, both Upton and Brower mention Fanny Mendelssohn as a *possible* counter-example to the idea of female creative inferiority, yet evoke the perfectly cyclical logic of the genius myth to depreciate the full implications of her work and existence. If, they both state, her works are no longer well known, this means they were not of true genius quality.

Also, as one early researcher on Fanny Mendelssohn recounts, those interested in her recovery had to face significant obstacles even in their attempts to get to know Fanny’s work, being ignored and avoided by employees of the Mendelssohn archive and eventually told that her music simply wasn’t very good (Weissweiler, 1997: 8). I do not want to discard the importance of these larger, external effects of mythical conceptions behind the women composer question; in fact, I believe that these external manifestations co-operated with the more internal ones analyzed during this article and that they call for a significant amount of future investigations.

In order to remedy the problems presently outlined, I would like to suggest two chief courses of action. The first is, indeed, further research; there are still countless female composers and their works to be fully recovered and analyzed. We still need to know much more about how this gigantic “disappearance act” of women from musical history could actually take place and what this may mean for women wanting to create music today. Above all, however, the vast amounts of works of recovery and analysis that already have been produced in this area still deserve far more distribution and attention. We need more classes, conferences, books etc. on the subject of women composers; we need more recordings, concerts and presentations of their works. It is time to recover all these musical pieces and existences, not just to do justice to the past but to continue creating new, more liberating stories upon which creatively inclined women

and men may base their lives, musical productions and experiences.

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