

**Laurel Parsons and Brenda Ravenscroft, eds. 2016. *Analytical Essays on Music by Women Composers: Concert Music, 1960–2000*. New York: Oxford University Press, 244 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-023686-1**

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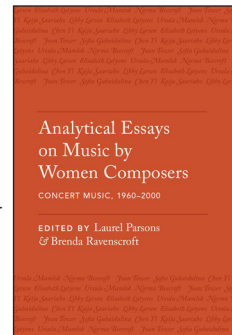
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Laurel Parsons and Brenda Ravenscroft, eds. 2016. *Analytical Essays on Music by Women Composers: Concert Music, 1960–2000*. New York: Oxford University Press, 244 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-023686-1.

In the old music history curricula, women composers were treated like mythical creatures—rare and often invisible. Eugene Gates (1994) has charged the perpetuation of this myth on “a conspiracy of silence,” placing the blame on the combined shoulders of music historians, philosophers, critics, and psychologists (27). With the first instalment of *Analytical Essays on Music by Women Composers: Concert Music, 1960–2000*, editors Laurel Parsons and Brenda Ravenscroft, as well as their contributors, add their voices to the chorus clamouring for the dismantling of Gates’s conspiracy of silence. Acknowledging that scholarship on female composers has increased since the mid-1990s, the editors feel that mainstream music theory did not keep pace with the growth of this research. They note, among other troublesome statistics, that over the course of twenty years (1994 to 2013) only 1.51 per cent of all the articles published in eight peer-reviewed music theory and analysis journals were devoted to music written by a woman (3). It is this trend that Parsons and Ravenscroft are trying to counter, and their volume adds rigorous examples of analyses that could be used to augment courses in theory, analysis, and musicology.

The essays selected for inclusion represent two primary eras of composers. The first generation was born in the interwar years, including Ursula Mamlok (1923–2016), Sofia Gubaidulina (1931–), Norma Beecroft (1934–), and Joan Tower (1938–). The second generation, Chen Yi (1953–), Kaija Saariaho (1952–), and Libby Larsen (1950–) represent the postwar era. The outlier in this division is the English composer Elisabeth Lutyens (1906–83), born prior to World War I. Parsons and Ravenscroft do not claim a comprehensive array of essays, but rather a representative one, and it should be noted that although the date range in the subtitle is 1960–2000, no works from the 1970s are featured (5). Perhaps unsurprisingly the works chosen here for analysis written by pre- and interwar composers tend to date from earlier decades, while the younger composers’ works are more recent examples. The crossover between the two eras occurs in the middle of the 1980s, with Tower’s *Silver Ladders* predating Gubaidulina’s *String Quartet No. 2* by a single year.



*Improvvisazioni Concertanti No. 1* (1961), written by Beecroft at the age of twenty-seven, is both the earliest composition considered in the text and the one written by the youngest composer. The other music studied displays the work of established composers, with the older generation of composers tending to be in their fifties or sixties at the time of composition and the younger era being in their late thirties or forties. The works selected also cover the breadth of concert music with the genres of chamber music (instrumental and vocal) and orchestral works including concertos all being represented. Additionally, the pieces analyzed are accessible through commercially available scores and recordings, with the exception of Lutyens's work, which was recorded specifically for this volume and is included on the accompanying website. The website also includes high-resolution, (and where applicable) full versions of all examples in the text, making the details of some of the analyses more accessible.

Each essay is introduced with a brief biographical sketch standardizing background knowledge about the composer outside of the analytical sections. Ravenscroft and Parsons have organized the book into three thematic parts, providing the impetus for each in the opening of the section. "Part I: Order, Freedom, and Design" provides essays on Beecroft and Tower's work, in addition to Mamlok's *Panta Rhei* (1981). The authors of these essays work through analyses focused on the new or unusual ordering of pitches that became allowable in the twentieth century with the development of serial techniques and the wider incorporation of the octatonic scale into compositional practice. Jonathan W. Bernard's work on Tower and Christoph Neidhöfer's analysis of Beecroft's piece probe issues of the compositional process and the rigidity versus the flexibility of these composers' stylistic choices. Joseph N. Straus's research on Mamlok questions myths of serial tyranny and its demise, arguing that *Panta Rhei*, proceeding as it does with a "playful attitude toward serial ordering, and its frequent systemic glitches ... places her in a varied and eclectic mainstream of twelve-tone composition" (29).

In "Part II: Gesture, Identity, and Culture" Judy Lochhead and Nancy Yunhwa Rao approach the compositions of Gubaidulina and Yi respectively, drawing on perspectives concerning the identities of the composer. Rao reads Yi's Chinese identity through "musical gestures—culturally coded in interesting ways—[that] lead to particular aesthetic implications" (129), while difference as viewed through a Deleuzean lens is central to Lochhead's argument about Gubaidulina's string quartet. Lochhead finds that "a detailed analysis of the quartet allows for a more deeply nuanced sense of how Gubaidulina musically *thinks* difference" (105), and the forms and levels of difference that Lochhead deals with in this context are more multi-faceted than Gubaidulina's gender.

Those works, which include a vocal component, are grouped together in "Part III: Music, Words, and Voices." John Roeder's chapter on the third song in Saariaho's *From the Grammar of Dreams* focuses on the composer's setting of "Paralytic," a late Sylvia Plath text. Through an analysis considering the pitch, intervals, and rhythmic behaviour of the first measures of the work, Roeder demonstrates how the procedures developed in this early section of the piece continue throughout the song in order to "articulate the lines of the text, and to

create a fairly traditional flux of tension and relaxation” (157). Ravenscroft elucidates Larsen’s reading of Emily Dickinson’s poetry in two songs from *Chanting to Paradise*, as the composer takes on the identity of the poet, structuring her composition on the process used by Dickinson (178). Taking the temporal experience of Lutyens’s work as its starting point, Parsons’s analysis is unique within this volume, as she makes broader claims about Lutyens’s oeuvre, discussing the composer’s concept of time within *Essence of Our Happiness* and other compositions. Lutyens’s work is also the only vocal work featuring texts by male authors, including Abu Yazid, John Donne, and Arthur Rimbaud. The three are also the earliest authors set by composers in this volume.

The social resonance and relevance of the text by Ravenscroft and Parsons can be found in an example from the UK new music charity, Sound and Music. In 2014 Sound and Music began to adjust the sacrosanct Western classical canon by establishing expectations for the groups that they liaise with, including not allowing all-male selection panels or all-male programming in final performances. Susanna Eastburn (2017), chief executive of Sound and Music, has explained that these shifted expectations led to an articulation of a concern that the conscious inclusion of works by women meant that it was “no longer just about the music.” Eastburn, however, takes issue with the claim of declining musical quality with the inclusion of women composers, noting that unconscious biases are enacted when female composers are treated less seriously than male composers. Such treatment can take many forms, from asking questions about their personal lives rather than their music, to offering shorter or lighter commissions, or even (a real-life example) asking a famous female composer who had helped her with her orchestral piece, because she clearly couldn’t have done it all by herself. Parsons and Ravenscroft state that they offer their volume “as a contribution to the development of a body of evidence extensive and robust enough to respond to old questions and generate new ones” (9). Surely these eight analytical essays set the right sort of example, combatting the unconscious bias identified by Eastburn by asking about the composers’ music rather than only about their personal lives.

In their introduction to the text, Parsons and Ravenscroft question why they felt it necessary to link these essays under the banner of “women composers,” noting that the term is “old-fashioned and potentially marginalizing” (2). However, this volume, like the works analyzed within it, is the product of the milieu that shaped its authors. There has yet to be an overwhelming wave of scholarship on women composers, and that is why the term is used here (3). In her contribution, Lochhead discusses how a composer who is a woman “must hew out a place not only in which her compositional voice is heard as unique and hence different, but also in which her compositions are heard as ‘just’ music—not marked as an exemplar of an identity group .... Composers who are female necessarily confront this dilemma in their daily professional lives” (102–3). Parsons and Ravenscroft are likewise carving out a place for analytical scholarship on this repertoire. Perhaps in fifty years the separateness suggested in the volume’s title will no longer be necessary in combating unconscious bias. However, even if the appellation “women” were to be removed from the cover,

this text would still be an important and relevant work documenting a wide range of analytical approaches to intriguing pieces by composers who just so happen to be women.

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#### BIOGRAPHY

Twila Bakker completed her doctorate in musicology focusing on Steve Reich's Counterpoint pieces at Bangor University, North Wales. In 2018 she was awarded a stipendium from the Paul Sacher Stiftung (Basel, Switzerland) in order to further her current research, which addresses the ephemeral nature and extensive information accessible in born-digital sketch studies utilizing Reich's compositional output as a case study. She is a committee member of the Society for Minimalist Music and holds previous degrees in musicology from the University of Victoria and, music and history from the University of Alberta, Canada.