

CHAPTER II

As mentioned earlier, women's roles were restricted to those of "mother and wife". They had very little choices in the ways they were supposed to live their lives. If a woman was to step out of these "boundaries", she was often a target of social discrimination. As women started realizing that they too were entitled to very basic things such as equality within a world that had been clearly male, they began taking a course of action to make other women know that their situation had to change.

The goal for women was to put an end to "sexual subordination" as well as requesting less "restrictive laws". The rise of women for a better place in society came in the form of "The Seneca Falls Declaration", which was the start of what became the "women's movement" in the nineteenth century.(8) The prime statement made in this declaration came from the "Assumption that the rights of a man included the rights of woman meant that woman is not by nature man's property whose primarily purpose is to bring other generations of men into the world but is by nature equally a human being, with all the variations that implies"(8).

As women prospered in their attempt to communicate these views to other women, their movement kept on taking firm steps. As the message expanded, they slowly started asking for more. Women began seeking for "access to the rights and prerogatives men had, and to reevaluate and revalue women's nature and abilities"(6). Once they argued that they had the same "intellectual and spiritual endowment as men and therefore deserved the same opportunities and rights to advocate and develop", the Women's Movement were soon asking for, in Nancy F. Cott words, "egalitarian grounds for equal opportunity in education and employment and for equal rights in property, law, and political representation, while

also maintaining that women would bring special benefits to public life by virtue of their particular interests and capacities”(6). They surely were taking a big chance into changing the roles of women.

Of course all of this did not come without its pertinent opposing points of view by men, and surprisingly enough, by women also. They argued how this radical movement intended to make women “into men” and how they were trying to “set women against men in deadly sex antagonism”.⁶ Their remarks against these new generation of “liberal women” were specific. Such comments as “Women’s imitation of male-models, the shifting of the rock of secure gender roles, threaten not only social order and the upbringing of the next generation, but also men’s virtues and women’s authentic satisfaction” or “Women want to project a world in which self-seeking destroys gender assignment, family unity, kind ship bonds, social cohesion and human happiness”⁶ were common amongst the male population.

The traditional views of society assume that men and women are essentially different and should serve different social functions, and even if it is true that women have had it difficult in the world of music, today they have as much opportunities as their male colleagues. But it would be impossible to address their newly found freedom without analyzing their situation throughout the years. It is not surprising that now a days women are exposed to countless amounts of ways in which they can express themselves and be creative through the arts, but it has not always been this way.

The role that women used to play within the musical spectrum of the nineteenth century was scarce. Orchestras consisted of male musicians only with the presence of two or three women every now and then. They were restricted to playing instruments which, according to men, were proper for them and would allow them to show off their femininity.

These instruments were the harp, piano and of course, their voice (Clara Meierovich. “Mujeres en la Creación Musical de México”. CONACULTA, México D.F. 2000).

Pursuing a career in music was not always the best choice for women, especially in composition. Inside conservatories, academic programs were different for male students than those of females, restricting them to a few counter point lessons and a limited amount of theory. The incursion of women in music was merely seen as a “hobby” rather than a serious desire of self- expression.

All-female ensembles were formed in an attempt to pinpoint their need of a musical outlet. Unfortunately they were never able to maintain them for a long period of time and were not able to continue. Their lack of musical knowledge, not having an extensive repertoire and a poor development in composition, made it impossible to establish themselves as serious and credible musicians.

We can not forget that back then, society dictated what men and women were “supposed” to be doing. According to a social establishment of roles, women were destined to stay home, serve their men, and ultimately, have children. The only career that they could aspire to was that of “wife and mother”.

Of course, there are always exceptions and there were women who were able to break through these imposed rules. For example, Mexican composer Guadalupe Olmedo. Not even reaching twenty years of age, Olmedo was able to finish her studies in composition at the National Conservatory of Music in Mexico City. Though her work was not entirely appreciated, giving the fact that most of it was forgotten, she managed to acquire some level of success during her time. Unfortunately, as good as her work might have been, discrimination was obvious when comments were made: “Guadalupe Olmedo, joven de 19 años, es una de las dilettanti más aventajadas con que se honra la Sociedad

Mexicana. Perteneciente a una distinguida familia, la Srta. Olmedo se dedicó por recreación al estudio rudimental de la música sobresaliendo bien pronto como pianista de singular mérito; pero no conforme la niña con sus glorias de ejecutante, quiso ser compositora y estudió con excepcional aprovechamiento...” (Op. Cit).

Now, we wonder where or what has been the place of women in music? Many questions arise. Where there any real important female musicians? Has their work been kept through the years? Why don't we know a lot about them like we do if we are talking about Beethoven or Mozart? Is it a question of quality? Was their work not good enough to be preserved? Etc.

These issues have to be analyzed at a cultural level. In the case of Mexico, we can not compare the level of musical culture and investment on the arts to that of Europe. During the nineteenth century, Mexico's government was not focusing its attention at the arts because of the situation they were going through at that present time. Now, knowing that music was not the country's main concern, newspapers and magazines, which were the most important source of communication at that time, were always focusing on the music made and performed by men (if there existed any musical coverage at all). When a woman stood out because of her work or her level of performance, these were not supportive of their creations and therefore, the country did not learned from them. It was all manipulated by the press.

Another problem that female composers had to deal with was the lack of “diffusion” of their work. Orchestras and small ensembles were not playing these compositions. This made it impossible for audiences to listen and open their minds to what women had to offer. At the same time, and as a result of this, their work was soon forgotten and not kept for future generations to appreciate. (Op. Cit).

So, going back to the questions formulated before, is it a real surprise that we do not know a lot about what women were doing in the world of music during these past centuries? There were no famous female figures because, without the proper knowledge of counterpoint and theory, without the encouragement of teachers and society to devote themselves to composition, without the embrace of their work and talent and without the right diffusion of their work, the result of their efforts during that period of time pretty much failed. It is not until recent years that musicologists are working to rescue that which was forsaken.

In actuality, women are far from the restrictions and lack of opportunities of the nineteenth century. Recently, Clara Meierovich set herself on an ambitious task to analyze and study the role and incursion of women composers in Mexico. She reached her objective when her book “Mujeres en la Creación Musical de México” was published. In it, she recounts the road traveled by female composers in Mexico, beginning in the nineteenth century until present time. She focuses on twentieth century composers. The book basically presents Meierovich interviewing 17 of the most important women composers in Mexico, and through a series of questions, analyzes the actual situation that women face in this country today.

For most of the interviewed, composing and creating is their form of expression. It is a necessity to address certain thoughts and feelings through music. It is a way of communicating with people, and in the words of Marta García Renart: “componer para mí es como una carta, una conversación que tengo con la persona a quien se la dedico, es una manera de toda la vida y de tratar de comunicarme cuando me faltan las palabras...”. It is also a way in which they can digest and come to terms with their every-day experiences and troubles.

It would not be a surprise to learn that most of these female creators began their studies in music by playing the piano. Sometimes the guitar. The piano seems to be the instrument of choice for women that wanted to make it or get inside the world of “academic” music, and since these past centuries one of the few instruments that they were allowed to play was, in fact the piano, it is only natural that they would choose it as an outlet to later make the cross-over to composition and writing. Besides the fact that the instrument allows you to have an incredible range to create different and varied sonorities.

Some of these women came from a family that was already surrounded by music. This made it easier on them to pursue a musical career. It was easier for them to jump from just being an interpreter to actually creating something. But what is really interesting is that, the majority of the interviewed women, when asked “Cuáles fueron los ‘síntomas’ que presagiaron o perfilaron tu camino hacia la creación musical?”, their answer had to do with someone, an older person, encouraging them to keep creating. But what is even more interesting is that, the person they mentioned to have encouraged them was often an individual that was close to them, and in every situation, a man. For example, Graciela Agudelo showed her work to one of her male teachers, José Luis Gonzales, who gave her the confidence to keep going through that path. Marta García Renart showed her work to her brother who also encouraged her to keep writing. Gabriela Ortiz is another example of how one of her male teachers pushed her to follow the road of creating music. Marcela Rodríguez relied on Leo Brower’s opinion to take on composition when she got tired of being a guitarist only. The list of examples goes on. This makes us ask ourselves, do women need the approval of a man to acknowledge their work? Would a woman create or write without the consent of a male figure? Do women know their work is “good” or do they need a man to say if it is or not? Is the quality of women’s creations dictated by men?

Are women brave enough to write and create on their own terms?

Here is where we encounter a problem or issue that has been the object of controversy and discussion for the longest time, and is still relevant today. Musicians seem to antagonize the work produced by women through their tendency to differentiate or make it seem as though the music of male composers and music by women composers is different. The on-going stereotype remains. Strength, success and courage are masculine. Softness, vulnerability and sweetness are feminine. If someone were to say that there is a difference between what is masculine and feminine when it comes to writing music, then, could we say that Chopin's work is feminine, or even go further on our judgment and say he was gay? If a woman presents her work to be loud and forceful, does that make her a lesbian? There might be different ways in which women may approach certain things, but these are not exclusive to them. For example, most women set their attention on the details. That might explain why most of the women Meierovich talked to are more comfortable writing for small ensembles and chamber music.

In Clara Meierovich's book, the answers given by the majority of her interviewees to the question "Así como en la literatura y en otras disciplinas artísticas se habla de 'signos' o de características que prueban individualizar la obra producida por una mujer, de aquella concebida por un hombre, consideras que también esto es susceptible de aplicarse al lenguaje de la música?" were the same. It is almost impossible to say if a piece was written by a man or a woman just by listening to it. Leticia Armijo goes on to say "Lo femenino y masculino se manifiestan de diferente manera en ambos sexos". Mariana Villanueva points out "No puede existir una obra enteramente femenina o enteramente masculina, puesto que no hay un hombre enteramente masculino o una mujer enteramente femenina".

There is obviously a hint of discrimination involved. A lot of the old clichés are still present in our days, so it is not a question of talent and quality. Even though there might be physical differences between men and women, talent and the capacity to create are pretty much the same between the two sexes. We as human beings possess both masculinity and femininity, the only difference is that one of those develops in us more strongly than the other. The same thing happens in music. We might explore our masculine side in one piece of work and our femininity in another. The arts have no sex.

Then again, and based on what these 17 women had to say, the only palpable difference that we might find in music written by men and music written by women, lies on the “theme” or purpose of the material, its origin. These might be more obvious in songs where a text is added to the music, making its message or messages somewhat more specific to the ears of an audience. We as human beings, men or women, share daily life experiences like having a job, going to school, having to support a family, having friends and lovers etc. But, certain things in life are only lived by women. For example, giving birth. A man would never know what it is to carry a child for nine months, let alone delivering a baby. As good a father as he could be, he would never know first hand what that experience is like and would not be able to write about it the way a woman would. These differences of themes in songs are even more obvious in popular music, which will later be discussed.

With all this going on, women composers in Mexico seem to be dealing with only one obstacle: The diffusion of their work. They attribute this problem to an almost non existing musical culture in this country. This is the result of a poor musical education and the lack or no interest at all by the government to invest in the arts, making it hard for creators to find forums to expose their work.