FEMINIZING THE STAGE: EARLY LADY ORCHESTRAS AND THEIR MAESTRAS

In the past twenty years, feminist discourses on gender have increasingly begun to interrogate the centrality of the visual domain in defining Western art music, especially in the presentation of the feminine body. Indeed, considering the visual aspect of performance with our lens turned to the past also allows us to discover many new and interesting aspects of the lives of early female pioneers in the music profession. Since women lived in a world that saw them first as the subjects and objects of male domination and fantasy, female performers often had to present themselves according to what was expected of them in order to be accepted in the public sphere. Sherrie Tucker explains that one way of packaging their acts while affirming respectability was to conform to a specific version of "femininity," that is, a specific femininity born from The Cult of True Womanhood: *middle-upper class, white, domestic, and leisurely*.[1] In this chapter I offer a brief history of the rise of "first wave" women as conductors and leaders of their own "lady" ensembles (that is, orchestras from the late nineteenth century up to the Second World War). I illustrate how women negotiated normative ideas of femininity in their performances in order to be accepted by the society they lived in and eventually be received as acceptable female performers. After examining the influence of the Cult of True Womanhood on the first all-lady orchestra devoted to the playing of high art music, the Vienna Lady Orchestra, I briefly trace the history of other lady orchestras in North America, and conclude by showing how by the end of the 1930s, a new generation of conductors was beginning to emerge—women who were less concerned with appearances of normative femininity and more interested in the development of their careers as serious performers.

The Cult of True Womanhood (coined by Barbara Welter in 1966) had its beginnings in Victorian society in Great Britain, and emphasized a certain code of conduct for women in white, middle-upper class families in the nineteenth century: domestic, chaste and leisurely. With the surge of immigration from the British Isles, it is not surprising that the groups who most actively promoted this emblem of conventional femininity in the U.S. and Canada were white Protestants of the middle-upper classes (English, but also Germans), who also formed the ruling class in most North American societies. In fact, "Victorian" came to represent an ideology, a set of values and practices that delineated the sharp distinctions between class and gender, between the public male sphere and the private female sphere, common throughout Britain and in most parts of Europe.

Class played a major role in encouraging or restraining a girl from pursuing a musical career.[2] In upper and middle class societies, the dimension of time served as an essential parameter for delineating power and prestige, demarcating class differences, and maintaining gender hierarchies.[3] Time was "ideologically defined" both by class and gender.[4] Musical activities, as expressions of stationary time, "were considered *by men* appropriate and important" in establishing gender difference and gender hierarchy insofar as they facilitated "keeping women in the place that men had assigned them."[5] By the end of the nineteenth century, leisure had become increasingly connected with domesticity, and domesticity with the upper classes. Kay Dreyfus notes that "the cultivation of music as an (unpaid) accomplishment by the female members of the household became a symbol of leisure and stability for upwardly mobile or upper-class moneyed families."[6] By filling in "idle time" musical activities played a crucial role in helping women preserve the four central virtues of femininity—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Though the meaning of the term leisure was fluid and changing throughout the centuries, words such as "pleasure," "ease"

and "solace" were often used to describe this type of experience that especially valorized the nurturing of feminine "accomplishments" in the home.

The need to maintain sharp class distinctions, and the belief that musical activities were antidotes to women's licentiousness, sensuality and vanity, combined with the ideology that women were intellectually and physically inferior to men, made the music education of middle-upper class women a subject of intense concern and debate among male circles. Moralists were often divided on the utility of music in the proper education of girls, for as musicologist Regula Hohl Trillini notes, "music was regarded as one of God's greatest gifts as well as an enticement to perdition, an object of fear, desire, and prohibition."[7] On the one hand, to educate a girl musically meant to invest in her chances of future matrimonial bliss, and a father "risked neither the social shame nor the economic burden of producing an old maid."[8] Critics, however, also cautioned against the over-education of girls, fearing that too much knowledge would give them a taste of independence and would eventually make them abandon their sanctioned responsibilities. They stressed music as a domestic accomplishment, but only insofar as it was *needed* to encourage domesticity and the maintenance of class structure. For this reason, a musically accomplished woman was expected to perform only in *private* company, among family and friends, where she could remain invisible to society at large. She was also expected to choose works that didn't require too much study, and present them in a leisurely manner, with a certain degree of detachment.[9]

The general ideals of the Cult of True Womanhood were powerful forces in the formation and maintenance of "respectable" women's music ensembles all over Europe and North America. In her examination of early European all-lady orchestras and ensembles, German historian Dorothea Kaufmann observes that the first female working musicians were driven primarily by financial

need rather than a need for personal fulfillment. The main venues of popular entertainment consisted of concert saloons and variety theatres frequented by prostitutes, and associated with moral decadence, drunkenness, and masculinity—a situation that helped to "reinforce the bourgeois moral view that these women were curiosities outside the pale of social convention" and relegated them to the class of prostitutes.[10] Touring complicated matters. Without the protection of union regulations, women on the road often found themselves in disadvantaged positions: to work and earn a living they would sometimes be forced to provide sexual favours for their patrons or landlords, but to do so only served to prove the long-held view that music caused "fatal Consequences of Passions" in women, released their unrestrained sexual desires, and harmed men and society in general.[11] Such was the fear that accompanied these musical "prostitutes" that sometimes civil authorities would ban all-women musical groups from entering their cities.[12]

However, Kaufmann's examination of women in lady orchestras as one step above prostitutes has been critiqued by scholars such as Kay Dreyfus and Margaret Myers, who show that there were also many lady orchestras which were "superior" because of their "personal and musical qualities," and "were able to sell themselves more or less advantageously."[13] Dreyfus, in studying early European lady orchestras, notes that among the first female musicians in the public sphere "were members of a low-income" class, but who "did not necessarily belong to the working classes."[14] These women were either the wives or daughters of middle-class men who supported their music making for its financial contribution to the family. Other women were part of middle-class musical-artist families where music had been cultivated from generation to generation. The stigma attached to the music making of these women was combated and made more "respectable" by the hyper-feminization of the all-lady ensembles they performed in. One such group was the highly influential Vienna Lady Orchestra.

With the exception of the harpist, membership in professional symphony orchestras remained relatively closed in most Western countries where the performance of classical music flourished. Since many bands and orchestras began as military ensembles, the social and ideological foundations of these groups were geared towards the advancement of men. Thus, membership in symphony orchestras was generally open only to men, and female musicians were excluded for financial, physiological and moral reasons. This was even more reinforced in the case of the conductor position, due to its very public status. Responding to this initial exclusion, a group of women in late nineteenth century Vienna began a small chamber ensemble under the direction of a talented female violinist and pianist, Josephine Amann-Weinlich.[15] The Vienna Lady Orchestra was quite possibly the first all-woman symphony orchestra dedicated to the playing of art music to emerge in the nineteenth century. Due to its amateur nature, lack of resources, and its somewhat jumbled collection of instruments consisting of a few strings, a flute, a piano, and an organ, the ensemble's repertory was limited to light music, marches, and arrangements of dances.[16] In spite of its limitations, it nevertheless publicized its "association with one of the great courts of Europe" as well as its "elegant and highbrow" standing.[17] Josephine Amann-Weinlich led the group much like Haydn or Mozart would have led their own ensembles from the violin, harpsichord, or piano: conducting was intertwined with performing. Gradually, however, as the group expanded its numbers and repertoire, Amann-Weinlich began to take on a more principal role as maestra of her ensemble.

Central to being accepted as legitimate performers was assuring a sceptical public not used to seeing so many women on the stage led by another woman that what they were doing was something different from men—something "feminine" and in keeping with "woman's nature." Thus, a typical performance by the ensemble incorporated elements associated with femininity: flowers, white gowns, a change

of clothing at the intermission, and sometimes other garden ornaments. A *New York Times* reporter describes the debut performance of Vienna Lady Orchestra in New York, 1871, as follows:

> The spectacle was certainly a novel one. The platform was changed into a bower, and under the roses were sheltered . . . a score of blushing maidens attired in purest white . . . The sight of an organized force of female musicians was, until Monday, never offered in this country.[18]

Rather than masculinizing its performances, the ensemble intentionally hyper-feminized its appearance by staging it in a domestic setting, like a garden with flowers and a bower. As women of the middle and upper classes, their performances were really just reflecting their father's or husband's class and social status and wealth, and in doing so, the women became part of the leisure themselves—just as they served as ornaments to men in the home, as distractions from the workplace, as complements to their beautiful surroundings, so did they serve as ornaments here on the public stage. As Anna-Lise Santella notes, "[t]he orchestra sent a clear message with its visual representation: this was not an orchestra of women aspiring to be men."[19] In other words, the members asserted that neither were they competing with men, nor were they trying to be men. Rather, they wished to adhere to the standards of conventional femininity on and off the stage.

In her discussion of ladies' European orchestras, Margaret Myers observes that since women lived in a society which saw them first as "the sexual objects of men," critics often described their performances according to a system of gendered aesthetics, where the hierarchies in society between men and women were mirrored in the concert hall.[20] This is true of this lady orchestra. A music critic in Paris wrote that "Mme Amann-Weinlich is, first of all, entirely mistress of her orchestra," and he continued:

> Composer, performer and directress all at the same time, accompanying on the piano whenever it is necessary . . . As for those around her . . . Some are very pretty, especially the contra-bassists . . . with regard to beauty the first violins take the second place; the flutists are both fine women . . . sparklingly eyes, charming.[21]

How much were the attractive and smiling faces of the musicians responsible for the warm praise they received is difficult to say. This male commentator concentrated on the feminine qualities of the ensemble, as if to approve of their work—although performing publicly was a male activity, they were doing it in a feminine way. In fact, the largely amateur ensemble was not as polished as its publicity had boasted, and although the Parisian reviewer lamented that, "[t]he sonorousness of the string instruments is generally defective . . . the brass instruments exaggerate the 'forte'," he added that "[t]hese are the only criticisms we permit ourselves to make."[22] He quickly glossed over the technical and musical problems of the group by emphasizing instead the physical beauty of its performers. It seems that he was not apt to hand out a stern or "masculine" review on these modest maidens, and left the criticism of their unpolished artistry by the wayside.

Interestingly, because "real talent" was believed to be intrinsic to men, a woman who was especially talented would receive high praise by the process of being "masculinized"—i.e., given male traits. Reviews for Mme. Amann-Weinlich's conducting present her as both having a feminine soul, and a rational (male) mind. Consider this review from the concert in Paris referred to above:

> Mme. Amann-Weinlich . . . represents the perfect type of the grand priestess of the musical world. Her glance is comprehensive, her arm vigorous; she knows all the music by heart—so they say—and conducts from memory. Her intelligent face does not disappear behind the pages of a book of music; and

> one follows with the thousand sentiments which agitate her soul before the waves of harmony which unroll themselves at her command to the applauding public.[23]

The critic confers male qualities to the maestra's conducting style—vigour, intelligence, and focus—but also highlights the emotional quality of a woman's soul, and proceeds to describe the total effect of the physical beauty of her orchestra. From the critic's viewpoint, a woman could embody some level of musical (male) talent only insofar as the female body and soul remained feminine. In other words, women had to assert their inner "female souls" outwardly through the representation of their bodies. They did so to assure the public that despite their embodiment of what were believed to be male musical traits, such as strength and intelligence, they were still essentially women. This is what Mme. Amann-Weinlich and her women's orchestra did so well, and why they were so well received by audiences in Europe and North America.

The concerts of the Vienna Lady Orchestra, with their strong visual representation of femininity—of a femininity dictated by the Cult of True Womanhood—had a lasting impact on many women in the audience. In the late nineteenth century, various ladies' orchestras in Europe were created under the same name or a variation of it, such as "Viennese Lady Orchestra," or "Vienna Ladies Orchestra."[24] Santella notes that some orchestras had no connections with Vienna. One group, for example, was situated in Berlin, rather than in Vienna, and consisted of women string, flute, and drum players, as well as male clarinettists. A harmonium replaced the lower brass. Many of these "Vienna Ladies' Orchestras" would return to the U.S. in the years to come, spawning many other small chamber ensembles in the German American communities, and later in other sections of society.[25]

The influence of the Vienna Lady Orchestra can be noted in the many ways that "lady orchestras"—whether vaudeville ensembles,

chamber groups, or full-fledged symphony orchestras, white, black, middle-class or working-class—often presented themselves. Illustrations of the first wave of women's orchestras (ca. 1940) in Europe and North America, regardless of class and race, are strikingly similar in terms of presentation and dress—long evening gowns with many layers of fabric, high necks, long sleeves, usually white, and with some kind of floral decoration. Bows, flowers, sashes and other "girly" jewellery usually accompany these photographs. The influence of this early European lady ensemble can be traced all the way to Phil Spitalny's "Hour of Charm" orchestra of the 1930s—a striking replica of the Vienna Lady Orchestra, but in the realm of Jazz and popular entertainment—to André Rieu's Johann Strauss Orchestra—a contemporary ensemble of female string and male woodwind and percussion players that makes use of costumes and props during its performances. Several photographs of the first wave of women's music groups between 1900–1920s show musicians wearing closely matching dresses akin to uniforms, erasing all elements of individuality in favour of asserting a unified group identity.

The Vienna Lady Orchestra indeed became the model for other "proper" and "acceptable" lady orchestras and groups in Europe and North America. Santella demonstrates that the Vienna Lady Orchestra's US tour of 1871 initiated a snowball effect of all-women ensembles in North America in the years to come. In 1888, violinist Caroline B. Nichols established The Fadettes Women's Orchestra of Boston to provide employment opportunities for herself and other female musicians. The ensemble started out with six violinists, playing background music for weddings, receptions, and other musical affairs, including several functions of women's clubs in Boston. In 1895, seeing that her group had expanded to well over fifty members, Nichols began a serious study of orchestral conducting and developed her group into a larger lady's orchestra with winds and percussion. In 1898, she signed with Redpath and Southern Bureaus for the Chautauqua-Lyceum circuit, and her

orchestra appeared in first-class vaudeville theatres all over North America. Nichols went on to conduct the orchestra for over thirty years, and trained over six hundred women for professional careers as orchestral musicians.[26]

Like the Vienna Lady Orchestra, The Fadettes followed the conventions of the time and dressed in billowing white Victorian gowns that covered most of their bodies from the neck to the heel. It is interesting that a publicity photo dating from ca. 1920 shows The Fadettes in a very similar setting to the Vienna Lady Orchestra—the backdrop is that of a garden, and there are plants adorning the stage. Like its European counterpart, the orchestra also performed arrangements of light classical music including marches, waltzes and arias from popular operas, as well as incorporated vaudeville elements into their performances. All of this helped to showcase the women as domestic and leisurely, playing with a certain degree of detachment, for recreation's sake, and with no painstaking study. Music, it seemed, was to them a trivial accomplishment and a time-filler to relieve boredom. The reality, however, was quite different.

Another early lady orchestra in this tradition was The Woman's Symphony of Long Beach (the WSLB), California, founded by violin prodigy Eva Anderson in 1925. This was also one of the longest lasting organizations of its kind, and boasted over 100 female musicians. Anderson's background as a vaudeville entertainer with the Redpath Bureau heavily influenced the orchestra. In fact, some critics argued that Anderson "ran her women's orchestra more like a vaudeville show than a classical orchestra."[27] Like other all-women ensembles of its time, to maintain credibility the WSLB had to play music to the highest standards possible, but to gain the attention of their public, the women also had to utilize whatever means necessary. In their case, it was beauty, glamorous costumes, and showmanship. Sometimes, flowers would adorn the hair-dos of the women. Exploiting gender stereotypes, "softening"

appearances, and embodying excessive womanliness were strategies they used to represent their subversion to conventional norms. Emphasizing sexual difference seems to have been an important key to their acceptance as legitimate performers and even their success in the music profession. In fact, so successful were they in showcasing themselves as feminine—modest, leisurely and domestic—entertainers that unlike other all-women ensembles of its time, the WSLB was funded by taxes from the Recreation department of the City of Long Beach—all to the credit of Anderson, who "had a genuine gift for showmanship and a knack for engendering publicity."[28]

These "lady" groups were such archetypes of true womanhood set to musical sounds that their presentations, their repertoire, matching outfits, and the carefully designed settings they performed in, both articulated their social and historical context and simultaneously enforced it. Through their comportment, players showed how women could not only lead ensembles but play instruments (including 'manly' instruments) legitimately in the public sphere, and at the same time retain their femininity. They did so to assure the public that despite their embodiment of what were believed to be male musical traits, such as strength and intelligence, they were still essentially women. Again, this hyper-feminization reassured the critics that women were not there to compete with men, but, as Sherrie Tucker observes, they were there to do something *different.*[29] The emphasis on difference in their presentation was a successful tactic in the early 1900s. It not only allowed these groups to exist, but also to play music, and even make minimal wages. Emphasizing difference was vital for women pioneers in the music profession, as appearance became an important way to transmit images of respectability, especially since women's music making was now in the public (and therefore male) sphere.

There were many other all-women orchestras prior to 1940 that used dress, decorations and mannerisms as important signifiers of

their domestic roles, despite their appearance on the public stage. However, by the late 1920s, it was becoming evident that women were no longer interested in simply "fitting in"—those early pioneers of the past had already created an acceptable image of women on the stage. A new generation of conductors was beginning to emerge, and these women were less concerned with fitting into the norm and more interested in the development of their careers. The performance of conventional femininity and respectability had been central to women's acceptance as musicians in the past, but now that women performing on the stage was no longer a taboo, these young musicians of the 1930s were more interested in playing "serious" art music, and looked down on the elements of vaudeville. Some examples include Elena Moneak, founder and conductor of the Chicago Women's Symphony Orchestra, and Elizabeth Kuyper and her New York American Women's Symphony Orchestra. In 1926, Ethel Leginska founded Boston Women's Symphony Orchestra, which she conducted for several years. In the 1930s, Frédérique Petrides gathered a group of talented students to create the Orchestrette Classique of New York, and with the financial assistance of an affluent upper-class lady, Antonia Brico founded the New York Women's Symphony Orchestra in 1934. And in 1940, Ethel Stark created Canada's first all-women's symphony orchestra, the Montreal Women's Symphony Orchestra. The goal of these conductors was no longer to appease the public, but rather to train other women for careers as "serious" orchestral musicians. Their repertoires no longer consisted of light dance music and marches—markers of leisure and domesticity—but of the standard works played by major symphony orchestras.

The outbreak of World War II brought about a drainage of male talent in many orchestras all across North America. As men joined the war effort, women took on new positions in factories, businesses, and even in symphony orchestras. After the war ended, many women once again found themselves unemployed;

but instead of returning to their segregated groups, they began to lobby for change. A breakthrough finally happened with the inclusion of the screen during auditions. By the late 1960s, segregated women's orchestras were outdated, and yet it was by emphasizing their womanliness that early pioneers had navigated the values of the Cult of True Womanhood and had succeeded, to a large degree, in making women's music making in the public sphere so acceptable. Far from simply being "submissive feminine ladies" without any agency, without individual autonomy to choose new identities, these women used the performance of conventional "femininity" as an emancipating strategy. In doing so, they created possibilities for themselves, and eventually, for others.

NOTES

1. Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: "All-Girl" Bands of the 1940s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 89.
2. Kay Dreyfus, *Sweethearts of Rhythm: The Story of Australia's All-Girl Bands and Orchestras to the End of the Second World War* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1999), 13.
3. Richard D. Leppert, *Music and Image: Domesticity, Ideology and Socio-Cultural Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 28–29.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Dreyfus, 13.
7. Regula Hohl Trillini, "Like Perfect Music unto Noble Words: Gender Metaphors and Victorian Music Poetry," in *Dichotonies: Gender and Music*, ed. Beate Neumeier (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2009), 148.
8. Leppert, 29.
9. Ibid., 39.
10. Dreyfus, 29–30.
11. Leppert, 30.
12. Dreyfus, 30.
13. Ibid., 29.

14. Ibid., 13–14.
15. Anna-Lise Santella, "Modeling Music: Early Organizational Structures of American Women's Orchestras, in *The Birth of the Orchestra: History of an Institution, 1650–1815*, ed. John Spitzer and Neal Zaslaw (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 59.
16. Ibid., 60.
17. Ibid., 57.
18. Ibid., 58.
19. Ibid.
20. Margaret Myers, "Searching for Data about European Ladies' Orchestras, 1870–1950," in *Music and Gender*, ed. Pirkko Moisala and Beverly Diamond (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 23.
21. John Sullivan Dwight, ed., "Concerts de la semaine: Le nouvel orchestra féminin," in *L'Art Musical* (December 4, 1873), reprinted in *Dwight's Journal of Music: A Paper of Art and Literature*, vol. 33–34 (Boston: Oliver Ditson, 1875): 159–60.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Santella, 60.
25. Spitzer and Zaslaw, *The Birth of the Orchestra*, 62.
26. Mary Brown Hinely, "The Uphill Climb of Women in American Music: Performers and Teachers," *Music Educators Journal* 70, no. 8 (April 1984): 33.
27. Jeannie Gayle Pool, *Peggy Gilbert and Her All-Girl Band* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 29.
28. Ibid.
29. Tucker, 82.