



## Representation of Women Composers in the Whittaker Library

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### ABSTRACT

The Whittaker Library at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland has been making a concerted effort to improve the equality and diversity of our stock for some time. In this paper, I begin by outlining my own efforts to increase the Whittaker Library's stock of music by women composers, and scholarly literature not only by but also about women composers. As a small library in a small specialist institution, the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, resources are not limitless, but it has been possible to make this project one of our priority areas. I describe the measures taken to build up stock in this area, alongside building a dedicated page on the library's portal. Running alongside this, I have made a similar drive to improve representation of music by composers of colour. Over and above all this, we have increased our social media activity; meanwhile, another colleague; has been working with some of our academic colleagues in terms of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in course reading lists, as I shall also describe; and a third has been working on EDI in the drama collection. Recognising the limitations not only of budgets, but also the comparative availability of materials by and about women only a few short decades ago – not to mention historically – I aim to provide food for thought, underlining the importance of close collaboration between the library and academic colleagues.

**Keywords:** Women, composers, composers of colour, equality, diversity, libraries

### Background

Whilst it is common to begin a scholarly article with a literature survey, it is more difficult when offering a case study of a library initiative that is ahead of the game in terms of what similar libraries have achieved to date. The Whittaker Library is a small, specialist library at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS), supporting the learning and teaching of musicians, drama, stage production, film and ballet students. Conservatoire libraries support undergraduates and postgraduates on taught and research courses, but are not on the same scale as typical university libraries, and obviously have a narrower coverage of subjects.

My efforts in recent years to improve the representation of women composers in the library, are merely one aspect of a larger drive to improve equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) across the board. I am one of three Performing Arts Librarians. The present paper focuses on music purely because it is the area in which I'm most involved, along with colleague Catherine Small, who alerted me to the International Women's Day conference from which this paper stems, and whose permission I have to cite her here. (Another colleague takes responsibility for the drama collections, and has long had a proactive approach to improving diversity and equality in that part of the library's stock.)

Catherine Small and I co-led a roundtable on diversity and de-colonising the library for our professional music librarian organisation in 2021, also inviting an EDI intern from the National Library of Scotland, and one of our opposite numbers from Glasgow School of Art. We formed the impression that, although our library was by no means the only music library embarking on such initiatives, it was probably the one that was trailblazing on the most fronts at once (International Association of Music Libraries (UK & Ireland Branch), 2021) which means that there is an absence of a body of literature to draw upon or refer to, in our own narrow specialisms.

By contrast with significant activity in terms of de-colonising both the curriculum and the library – see for example the recently published Crilly and Everitt, (2021) *Narrative Expansions: Interpreting Decolonisation in Academic Libraries* - there seems to be an absence of contemporary articles about university librarians trying to get more books by women onto the library shelves. Perhaps this is because libraries have not historically tagged authors as male, female, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of colour), disabled or otherwise, and so there are no precise statistics about library holdings for any given category – just an awareness of the male whiteness of the majority. Interestingly, however, there are a couple of documented instances of libraries deliberately establishing libraries of books by women, such as the Women's Building at the Chicago World Fair in 1893 and in the Women's Court at the 1925–26 Dunedin and South Seas International Exhibition, whilst the Glasgow Women's Library is a shining present-day example (Searing, 2012; City of Literature, 2017; *Glasgow Women's Library | Celebrating Scotland's Women*, 2022). It is quite likely that activity is taking place in many libraries, without being reported in in the professional press.

One step on from my efforts in getting more music by women composers (and composers of colour) onto the library shelves so that students and staff alike have music by women or ethnic minorities to perform, comes a related activity: that of addressing the gender citation gap in reading lists generally. I shall refer later to my colleague Catherine Small's activities in this area. Again, there

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is more literature on this subject: Heidi Hardt at the University of California has investigated the detrimental effect of this gap in political science citations, and the increase in confidence of women students when it is addressed. (Hardt et al., 2018; Hardt et al., 2019). Linsay Reece-Evans has done similar work in the field of library and information science (Reece-Evans, 2010). There has also been work in developing gender balance assessment tools by Jane Lawrence Sumner at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities; and the Open Syllabus project, a non-profit research organisation which allows academics to develop their reading lists and librarians to manage their collections (Sumner, 2018).

### Library Coverage of Historical Women Composers

Functioning as a librarian for the greater part of my week, but as a researcher for a significant smaller proportion of it, my concern for the representation of women composers in the library began, not with contemporary women, but with women two centuries ago. My own research had unearthed women who catalogued and performed music, as much as composing it; I even discovered that at least one nineteenth century legal deposit library retained, but didn't always catalogue music if it had a woman's name on it. Like Schroedinger's cat, it was simultaneously *in* the library and not in it: the music was included in large, composite bound volumes, but there was no catalogue record of those individual women's items being there.

It follows that on days when I did my research in the morning, but returned to my librarian desk in the afternoon, I was motivated to ensure that the library held relevant textbooks concerning the historical role of women in music – the women I had been researching and writing about earlier in the day. Indeed, the writing of a collaborative article for the *Trafalgar Chronicle* (McAulay and Robertson-Kirkland, 2018), convinced me that there certainly was an interest in teaching students more about this topic, and that such books would be well-used.

I made a point of indexing the books that I acquired for the library with the terms 'women in music' and 'women musicians', to ensure they'd be readily retrieved if someone was looking for them.

### Library Coverage of Contemporary Women Composers

It was only a short step between the historical past, and today's reality, so I also began to watch out for more contemporary treatment of the topic. I've always had a general interest in music by women, quite regularly blogging about this for the library for the past decade or so (<https://whittakerlive.blogspot.com/> until July 2020, after which a Wordpress site was created at <https://whittakerlive.wordpress.com/>). Two or three years ago, my hitherto fairly passive interest became an active priority. My concern extended beyond the literature, to ensuring that the most significant sheet music was available in the Whittaker Library. I became concerned that modern women composers should also be adequately represented. Historically, Felix Mendelssohn's sister Fanny Hensel Mendelssohn, and Robert Schumann's wife Clara were the two most frequently encountered nineteenth-century names, with Ethel Smyth and the American Amy Beach's output being increasingly mentioned, and a number of well-known modern women composers – but there were dozens, if not hundreds of names whom few musicians would think of if challenged to 'name five women composers'.

## Exam Syllabuses and Education

In 2015, a 17-year old English schoolgirl, Jessy McCabe, successfully petitioned Edexcel to include more women in the A-Level music syllabus; she obtained nearly 4000 signatures, and the outcome was the addition to the syllabus of five set works by women composers from Clara Schumann to the present day – not a lot, but a start – and the story was reported in *The Guardian* (Khomami, 2015b, 2015a). This subsequently led me to reflect on the situation in Scottish education by examining the SQA (Scottish Qualifications Authority, which is broadly involved in skills and training, with the main purpose of accreditation and awarding qualifications) music syllabi. Just as McCabe had found in the Edexcel A-Level syllabus, the imbalance between mention of male versus female composers in SQA syllabi was very pronounced. I also looked at the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music instrumental syllabi and found a very similar position. It wasn't encouraging, and it was hard not to conclude that tokenism might have been at play; moreover, finding a few short, educational pieces in examination or other anthologies is hardly the same as highlighting major works played in public performances.

### Our Teaching Students

Why should this matter so much? From our own institutional perspective, the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland teaches both a B.Ed. course and postgraduate teaching qualifications, in addition to first degrees focusing on performance. If today's students are not better informed about women's compositions, they will miss the opportunity to enlighten the next generation of music pupils taking National 5 exams (taken in their fourth year of secondary schooling) and Highers (taken a year later).

With women evenly represented as students in the three university music departments I'd studied at, it was not that women were missing out on a musical education as undergraduates, although my first two universities certainly lacked women academics. (There were few role models for me in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a realisation that has only recently dawned on me.) At the

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same time, the lack of music *composed* by women – whether in school syllabuses or library catalogues – was most likely attributable to societal attitudes towards women composers. Women have experienced greater challenges to get their compositions published and performed, with the knock-on effect that at school level, teachers would know far more repertoire by men in the main musical canon, than by women.

### Our Performers

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At Higher Education level, I concluded that if women weren't better represented in today's library catalogues, then our present undergraduate and postgraduate music students would miss out on opportunities to include these compositions in their repertoire and concert programming. Indeed, students who aspire to become star performers may still also have a second string to their bow in the form of instrumental or vocal teaching; they, too, need to know what repertoire is actually out there, both for themselves and their pupils.

### Building up Lists of Names and Music: Methodology

Tracing all the women composers was an impossibility, but any steps taken to improve the balance would be worthwhile. I began with colleagues' names, and the names I already knew were represented in the library. I continued by adding the relatively sparse list I'd collated from the Edexcel and Associated Board syllabi; and I visited the Scottish Music Centre for recommendations. I contacted teaching colleagues, to seek further recommendations both of women composers and particular works that they would like to see in our stock. A number of textbooks were also particularly useful to ensure I hadn't missed any influential or especially prolific names (Beer, 2016; Hammond, 2020; Holder and Russell, 2020).

Building up a spreadsheet as a working tool for my own use, I added to the mainstream classical the other traditions studied at RCS – jazz and traditional. Against each name, I noted where I had found mention of them, whether we had any of their material in stock; whether a particular piece had been requested; whether we had digital as well as, or as opposed to physical media; how well they were represented in physical or digital scholarly material to which we had access – I was looking for both analytical and biographical material - and any website details.

With no additional budget, clearly the library could not buy every piece we would ideally have liked to have in stock. There was too much ground to cover, and there were too many under-publicised women composers. I was determined that we would buy published music, but would not set out to seek 'freebies'. Artists deserve to be paid for their art; rent and groceries cannot be paid for by goodwill alone. Moreover, it was important to ensure that we acquired published material by established composers. There's a world of difference between a serious and considered composition by a professional composer, and the kind of competent but run-of-the mill tunes that I and hundreds like me compose in our spare time!

### Repertoire and Student Numbers

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Selecting new music, I've tried to ensure a balance of music for different instruments and voices. I have borne in mind that, just by the nature of the instruments, we have a lot of violinists – orchestras need up to thirty of them for a big symphonic piece. Similarly, we have a lot of pianists, and dozens of singers, but I've also considered under-represented instruments, like the classical accordion, the percussion ensemble or music involving electronics as well as conventional instruments. When it comes to ensemble pieces, I've tended to get music for comparatively small ensembles, thinking that this might get played more. And I've tried to include music by women of colour and from other continents, not just of European origin.

### A Catalogue is not a Bibliography

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It is worth clarifying at this point, that a catalogue can only list items that a library actually possesses. Each entry links either to a physical item, or to an item for which the library has purchased digital rights, whether an e- book, a digital score, a digital recording or an electronic database. The catalogue cannot list works that it does not hold in some format.

### Portal Pages – Linking to Library Stock and to further Information

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RCS has a portal for internal use by the RCS community, and the library already has a series of pages for different disciplines, where we can promote e-resources or useful websites, for example for particular courses, or with an emphasis on different aspects of diversity and equality. The portal is ideal for an online list which can both link to library materials, but can also list composers for whom the library has no holdings, for whatever reason. For example, a composer's music may be electronic, with no score published, or their works may be available only for hire. Or perhaps they have a fabulous website listing a plethora of compositions, but we can only hold a few of them. Such websites are useful resources in their own right.

## Portal Pages – Subdivided into Groups and Individuals

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I set up a page where I could list women composers and relevant resources, often highlighting materials we had in stock or websites where enquirers could learn more. Several groups were already compiling lists of musicians – such as Donne’s *Archive Frau und Musik*, (Donne, 2022) or The Daffodil Perspective, a radio programme produced by Elizabeth de Brito (de Brito, 2021). Whilst I couldn’t add all the names on their lists to my own library-specific list, I could at least ensure their websites were listed on the portal. My page for women composers divided itself naturally into resources such as listings, organisations, or anthologies of multiple composers – and an A-Z listing of individuals.

### Social Media and Outreach

I’m a fairly prolific user of social media, so I was able to reach out to further composers through Twitter. At some point early in 2020, I was also offered the opportunity to write a piece about forgotten women composers for *The People’s Friend*, a D C Thomson women’s magazine. Whilst this had no impact on the RCS community, it meant that I was able perhaps to make a much wider readership just a little more aware of the inequality that lurked in their music cabinets, and to read about just some of the women who deserved to be a lot more heard (McAulay, 2020).

### Networking with Composers

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The women composers project proved to be ideally suited to working from home during a pandemic. Making direct contact with a number of individuals was an enjoyable activity at a time when actual personal connections were so restricted, and later on, it was equally enjoyable to see a steady flow of new materials arriving for cataloguing. No item newly purchased for this project was catalogued without a suitably celebratory library tweet, and I notified academic colleagues if something looked obviously suitable for specific individuals. Some were enthusiastically receptive, which was pleasing.

### Reading List function

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More recently, I’ve created a single long reading list, accessible to anyone using the Whittaker Library catalogue, which lists all the library’s music by the women composers listed on the portal, along with relevant textbooks. Publicity is key, so the reading list link has been tweeted, emailed and blogged about. I make much use of social media, including having curated the library blog – Whittaker Live – for the past two decades. This has in turn resulted in a few more suggestions, gratefully welcomed.

### Composers of Colour

Improving the representation of women composers was, however, only half of the project. At the outset, I decided it was imperative to address not one, but two inequalities at once, and I simultaneously replicated the process in order to improve representation by composers of colour. The discovery of a slim paperback aimed at school pupils was particularly helpful in starting to build up this particular list. Holder and Russell (2020) had just published *Where are all the black female composers? The ultimate fun facts guide* and while the book would not be detailed enough for an undergraduate essay, it is ideal for an overview of some key names and therefore potentially useful for education students. Hopefully, someone might recommend it to a school library when they start teaching. If this book led to another slight imbalance in our stock, then I have attempted to redress that balance by sourcing music by black male composers as well; moreover, Holder has listed a few black male composers on his website, and has indicated that another book might be forthcoming in due course.

There is, accordingly, a separate page on the library portal listing composers of colour, constructed along similar lines – a section for organisations, lists and anthologies; and another A-Z for individual composers, always highlighting materials in stock and composers’ own website where known; there’s also another online reading list for access via the catalogue, parallel with the list for women composers.

The portal pages for women composers, and composers of colour, both fall under a larger portal section dedicated to equality and diversity issues, making our readers aware of useful literature on this topic, particularly, but not exclusively e-books.

### De-colonising Course Reading Lists

Whilst I worked at building up our music stock, my colleague Catherine Small embarked upon another large-scale project, inviting academic colleagues to work with her in assessing course reading-lists in an effort to de-colonise reading material where possible, so that the library can contribute to addressing EDI in as many ways as possible. The process has not been forced upon colleagues – it is simply an invitation – and involves, for example, considering dominant voices and narratives; the author’s identity; how Western or Eurocentric the text is; who is talking about whose culture, and where the text was published.

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Using guidance gleaned from other institutions who have already embarked on this kind of exercise, Catherine devised a portal page suggesting new ways of looking at reading-lists, and indicating some of the questions that staff might ask themselves. The page falls into three sections – questioning the reading lists; considering ways to make them more diverse; and finding suitable resources.

### Social Media: D is for Diversity

The library makes extensive use of social media, maintaining Twitter and Instagram accounts and a Padlet page to share interesting equality and diversity-related weblinks. In 2021, Andy Dougan – a film studies lecturer – contributed a fortnightly series of blogposts on Whittaker Live, entitled ‘D is for Diversity’, featuring twenty-six different film producers (Dougan, 2021). The series was so well-received that we envisaged a new series of blogposts this year, endorsed by our Equality and Diversity team. The ‘Spotlight on Diversity’ series was intended to engage our readers in a collaborative series of reviews highlighting their response to something from the library collection which they found particularly inspirational.

### Scottish Library and Information Council

RCS Information Services recently successfully competed for funding from SLIC – the Scottish Library and Information Council – to enable us to push forward with new initiatives. This opportunity was timely, since RCS is undergoing a full undergraduate curriculum review exercise. This funding helps us further diversify our library collections, with an emphasis on acquiring materials created by EDI writers or composers. Thus, topics concerning a specific protected characteristic should be written by people with lived experience of that protected characteristic, and RCS community engagement is to be encouraged. Events were also scheduled for a special ‘Spotlight on Diversity’ week to encourage further student and staff involvement, and to showcase some of our new materials in live performances.

### Conclusion

The Whittaker Library has made a promising start in its commitment to improving library coverage of groups who have been marginalised for far too long. It is an ongoing commitment, with no question of an end date, since it is more a matter of embedding the approach in all future work, than of completing a project. What is evident is that networking is absolutely crucial to success, whether with composers, other individuals and organisations working on improving the visibility of under-represented groups, teaching colleagues within our own institution, or of course, the students who are the prime reason for the library’s existence. Seminars and conferences are similarly great opportunities for sharing useful weblinks or lists of names, so that those who are not quite so far along the track can benefit from work already done, rather than having to ‘reinvent the wheel’ all over again. Utilising reference sources already to hand, and keeping an eye on social media or professional current awareness sources are also important tools for discovering – or rediscovering - overlooked women, and following up interesting postings can often lead to useful networking opportunities. Perhaps most importantly, however, is the necessity of always bearing in mind that the end goal is not merely to fill a library with more representative collections, but to encourage library users to discover and use the new resources to maximum effect. In a Conservatoire, this means getting the new, more diverse repertoire out beyond the library door and into performances. It is incumbent on anyone involved in this kind of work to keep their ultimate goal in mind.

### Biography

*Karen McAulay* is dual-qualified in music and librarianship, with a PhD on historical Scottish music collecting. She is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Library & Information Professionals, holds a PGCert in Learning and Teaching in Higher Arts Education, and is an FHEA.

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