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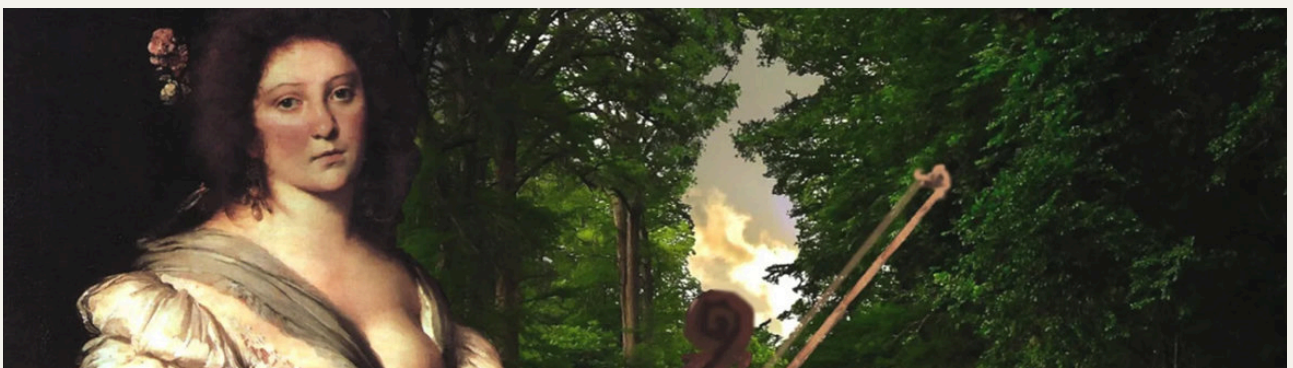
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MUSIC

Women Composers - Part 1

BY ELIZABETH MOONLIGHT — 2024-10-19



Introduction

If you were to ask someone to name a classical music composer, the result would almost certainly be a man - most likely one of those named below.

But first, for the musicologists out there, let me define 'classical' in the broad sense of the word, meaning the long tradition of 'art' music that includes the familiar names such as *Vivaldi*, *Bach*, *Mozart*, *Beethoven*, *Brahms*, *Tchaikovsky*, *Wagner*, *Stravinsky* etc etc as well as contemporary composers of film music such as *John Williams* and *Hans Zimmer*.

As a matter of interest, in the study of music history, only the period from about 1750 to 1820 is termed 'Classical'. That would only include Mozart and Beethoven from the list above. *Beethoven* is normally considered to be a bridge between the Classical¹ period and the next period, the Romantic².

So, let's take a journey through music history and discover some remarkable women composers.

Part 1: 810 to 1650

Kassia (born 810 Constantinople)

Kassia³ is the earliest female composer whose works survive today. In 843 she founded a convent in Constantinople⁴ and became its first abbess. She wrote music and hymns for use in the religious services there, many of which are still

¹[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_period_\(music\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_period_(music))

²https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romantic_music

³<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kassia>

⁴<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constantinople>

in use in the Byzantine liturgy⁵ to this day. Music at that time would have been predominantly for voices and religious purposes, and would not have had harmony as we understand it. It would have consisted of a single vocal line.

Modern performances of this music tend to add a second or third voice or instrument to supplement the overall sound. An example of this can be heard in the performance attached, with a wind instrument playing a countermelody⁶ to the vocal line, and a string instrument filling in the texture with a drone⁷ (a long sustained note) and a second counter melody. A drone note would have been a common feature of music from this time. You can still hear it today, for example, in music played on bagpipes.

This early music can sound strange to our modern ears. Personally I find it very atmospheric, having an almost otherworldly feel, yet having the power to speak to us across twelve centuries.

⁵https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Byzantine_Rite

⁶<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Counter-melody>

⁷[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drone_\(sound\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drone_(sound))



Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bNzBWbSWqfY>

Abbess Hildegard von Bingen (born ca. 1098 Bermersheim, Germany)

Hildegard⁸ is probably the best known female composer from this Medieval era. There have been many recordings of her music in recent years, and more of her music survives than any other composer from this era. She became a Benedictine⁹ nun when she was fifteen years old and was elected to abbess in 1136. As well as a composer, she is also referred to as visionary and a mystic.

⁸https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hildegard_of_Bingen

⁹<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benedictines>

In the short piece here, you will hear a drone note played on a Tibetan singing bowl¹⁰ accompanying the vocal line. I find this performance, enhanced by the visuals, quite spine-tingling. The mysticism of Hildegard feels very real here.



Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdLkRlxJjA>

¹⁰https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Standing_bell



The visuals also briefly show, at the beginning and end of the video, the early form of music notation that Hildegard would have used. The observant amongst you will notice that it differs from our present day notation system. One obvious difference being the use of only 4 horizontal lines rather than the 5 we use today. This notation is called neumes¹¹, and originated in the 9th century. They were simple symbols used to indicate the shape of a melody. They were a refinement of a similar system created around 200 years earlier.

Barbara Strozzi (born 1619 Venice, Italy)

We jump forward a few hundred years to a time where music had moved on and developed more complex forms.

Barbara Strozzi¹² was a highly regarded composer and singer who published eight collections of her songs. She was the daughter of renowned poet Giulio Strozzi¹³, and a member of one of the most powerful families of Florence. A study of her life shows her to have been an extraordinary woman of talent, beauty and intellect, who published 125 pieces of vocal music. A contemporary painting gives us a remarkable glimpse of this fascinating lady.

It is likely that many of the songs she wrote would have been written for her own use. She was described as a virtuosic singer, and her vocal music shows daring for a composer of her time. She took tremendous care in the setting of her texts, creating an intimate connection between words and music. The video clip here presents, in my opinion, a superb interpretation of possibly her most famous song. The text for this song and a translation into English can be found in the YouTube notes.

The more musically minded amongst you may notice that the song uses a constantly repeated bass line, (technically called a 'ground bass¹⁴' or 'basso ostinato') and can be heard here played by the soloist right at the start of the piece. It consists of just 4 notes in a descending scale. This is repeated again and again while the voice and the other instruments play. These other instruments will often improvise over the bass or play a melodic line imitating the voice. The irony here is that this 800-year-old ground bass compositional technique is still used today, and can be heard in modern pop/rock music, though now referred to as a 'bass loop'.

¹¹<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neume>

¹²https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbara_Strozzi

¹³https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giulio_Strozzi

¹⁴https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ostinato#Ground_bass



Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oVfESNE-vSQ>

With Barbara Strozzi's composition from around 1650, we have arrived in the period of music called the Early Baroque¹⁵. Prior to the Baroque period we had the Medieval and Renaissance periods. In part two of this series¹⁶ we will take a look and listen to 3 women composers from the Baroque period. This will take us up to the year 1750. Future articles will deal with the later Classical, Romantic and Modern eras.

¹⁵[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baroque_music#Early_baroque_music_\(1580-1650\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baroque_music#Early_baroque_music_(1580-1650))

¹⁶<https://thehiddencircle.com/women-composers-part-2/>