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**What happened to women composers in Dutch music history?**

**(Composers whose names are in bold type are represented in the discography at the end of the article).**

The purpose of this article is twofold: to introduce a number of Dutch women composers and to briefly discuss some aspects of Dutch music history in relation to gender. The focus will be on classical music, both because there is little record of women in other genres, such as folksongs and liturgical music, and because some genres, such as military band music, by definition traditionally excluded women's participation.

Musicology has long focused on examining works by individual composers, concentrating on the so-called canon, classical masters such as Bach, Beethoven and Mozart. Currently, a broader, more sociological approach is winning ground. This approach examines how music functions and its social and cultural context, with attention given to its production, distribution and reception. Music, from its conception through its distribution and reception, can be seen as part of a functional system with a wide range of institutions, such as orchestras, music clubs, publishers, and audiences. Music, as one of the arts, is

characterized by a high degree of sociability; playing music is often an activity done together and for others.

One of the perspectives within this more sociological approach concentrates on examining how music is related to gender, that is to a society's belief system or construction, varying in time and place, of what is considered male and female. Such a division is a basic social organizing principle throughout history in all cultures, and also affects music at many levels. Some musical genres have historically been considered to be feminine, like children's songs, while others, like drinking songs, are considered to be more suited for men. Gender may also be examined at an institutional level: what roles did women and men play in various musical institutions, such as orchestras and choral groups, as pianists or vocalists, in publishing music, teaching it or consuming it? Gender is also often a relevant factor in the choice of a musical instrument. Some instruments, such as brass and percussion, have traditionally been regarded as more suited for boys, while others, such as the piano and harp, came to be considered more suited for girls.

Composition has traditionally been a male domain; women have always formed a very small percentage in this field. At any point in time their numbers in the Netherlands have ranged from less than 1% to about 15%. In the history of Dutch music, occasional but significant "windows of opportunity" appear to have stimulated women to enter this male-dominated field. In this essay several of these "windows of opportunity" will be described.

In the seventeenth century, the so-called "Golden Age," the arts and sciences flourished in the Netherlands. The Dutch Republic was officially Calvinist, and in Protestant churches music was severely limited, but it was widely practised by the well-to-do as a leisurely pastime. Upper-class women and men often made music together in informal domestic circles. Countless genre pieces and portraits painted in the Golden Age attest to a rich musical life in which both sexes participated. Seventeenth-century women both sang and played a wide range of instruments, the most common being various types of keyboard instruments such as the harpsichord or the virginals. One survey of Dutch art in the Golden Age showed that almost 97% of the virginals shown being performed are being played by women and girls.

#### *A unique figure*

These domestic musical practices continued into the eighteenth century. An especially rich musical environment could be found at court in The Hague in the second half of the eighteenth century. Prominent musicians from all over Europe, including the young Mozart and his sister Maria, were invited to perform for the Stadhouder and official dignitaries. One of the audience members was Baroness Josina

van Boetzelaer, née van Aerssen, a personal attendant of Princess Caroline. Born in 1733, her upbringing included the usual requirements for young ladies of standing: French, embroidery and singing. Until her marriage in 1765 she was a lady in waiting to Princess Anna and later to her daughter Princess Caroline. She probably made music with the princesses on a daily basis, as both were very accomplished musicians. After her marriage in 1765, she studied composition with an Italian teacher, F.P. Ricci, who was living in The Hague at the time. Her first compositions were ariettas, short songs in the style of Mozart. She then wrote two collections of arias with chamber orchestra, on texts by Metastasio. That is about all we know about her, but some information can be gleaned from the dedications of her three extant compositions. She dedicated the ariettas to the Marchesa Visconti, the author of the poems she set to music. Opus 2 is dedicated to the Italian composer Maria Teresa Agnesi, and in the dedication of opus 4 she names the Austrian composer Marianna Martines. These women inspired her; today we would call them role models.

Baroness van Boetzelaer is a unique figure in Dutch music history. In the eighteenth century almost all composers in Holland were foreigners who settled there. Her choice of Metastasio was also very unusual for the Netherlands, although his librettos were very popular in the rest of Europe. Not only did she compose, she also had her music published, giving it a better chance of survival.

#### *The transition to semi-public concerts*

We may safely assume that Baroness van Boetzelaer's music making always remained

in the private sphere. Once informal get-togethers became more formal institutionalized structures, whereby the wealthy made music outside their homes and the private domain was left behind for a more public one, an important change occurred. Women were eased out of participation, most likely because the public domain was considered to be for men.

From the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries countless music clubs were founded, some lasting only a short period, others surviving many decades or longer. They were open to men only, men with prominent public functions, such as educators, clerics, physicians and businessmen. For example, in 1715 four lawyers in The Hague decided to rent a room at an inn so that they could play music on Thursdays from 4 until 9 p.m. It is easy to imagine these lawyers ambling over to the inn after a day's work, playing music together to relax and having a drink and a bite to eat. These *muziekcolleges* were central to Dutch musical life and some later formed the basis of city orchestras.

In addition to music clubs, there were also associations devoted to a wide range of activities for their members. One of the most important learned associations formed during the Enlightenment was the Felix Meritis Society. Founded in 1777, it was the most prestigious and active cultural organization in Amsterdam in the late eighteenth century and for most of the nineteenth. Membership was open to men eighteen years or older who were of the Christian faith. The Society was soon organized into five departments: physics, commerce, drawing, literature and music. The music department had two types of membership, paying and non-paying. Non-

paying members were accepted with the stipulation that they must play in the orchestra.

The music department grew in fame when in 1788 the Society's new building on the Keizersgracht in Amsterdam was opened, including a large concert hall with excellent acoustics. This hall could seat 400 people, with seating divided into various sections for regents, burgomasters, and the populace. Four hundred men were invited to the inaugural concert. The all-male orchestra consisted of professionally paid musicians and unpaid amateurs, the non-paying members of the Society. Remarkably, the next day the entire inauguration was repeated, this time for four hundred women. This was to welcome the women who were expected to accompany their men to the concerts. Without women in the audience, it was presumably felt, the concerts would be rather dull events.

The keynote speaker, Professor J.H. van Swinden, described the role division between men and women in which each had their proper place. This social structure was accepted because it was considered to reflect a God-given order. Van Swinden stressed that the activities of Felix Meritis would make women happy, a happiness derived from the endeavours of their husbands. A contemporary described this second inauguration as follows:

Then the overture of the day before began; as soon as this was finished Professor van Swinden was led by the President Commissioner to the same rostrum as the day

before, and made further a gracious and excellent speech again in the name of the Society to the Women, to welcome them on their first appearance in this new Hall, and he took the opportunity to depict the influence which the civilization of Man, through their practice of Science, fine Literature and beautiful Art, has on the happiness of Women, and also to show in what way and how far this practice can become not only a jewel, but also a source of satisfaction in the home and true happiness for Women.

A closer examination of the archives of Felix Meritis brings to light that although women were not allowed to become members, they did occasionally participate in the concerts. In fact, the music department is the only area in which women ever participated. Women were involved not only as members of the audience but also as vocalists, both as choral singers and as soloists. Dutch audiences were already familiar with women vocalists who appeared in the various foreign opera companies established in Holland; opera stars were regularly invited to sing popular arias at concerts. It was because of women's vocal range that they were accepted as singers in the public domain.

### *The piano*

The second window of opportunity opened in the late eighteenth century. Just as some training on the harpsichord or virginals had

been part of well-bred girls' upbringing, they were now expected to be able to play the piano. Because vast numbers of them were taught at least the rudiments of piano playing, it is logical that some remarkable talents surfaced. These talented young girls, whether the children of professional musicians or of non-professionals, the so-called "dilettantes," performed in public, with audiences eager to witness child prodigies.

In the mid-nineteenth century the novelist Nicolaas Beets described the timidity of a dilettante soloist and her reception: "She looked very pale, and I suspect she had not much noticed the obbligato on the horn just before. Mr. van de Hoogen took her by the little finger and led her [to the podium]. She made a curtsy, very gracious for a dilettante (...), and to loud applause and boisterous forward jostling by the men, seated herself before the instrument, pulled off her gloves, and her sweet hands floated over the keys."

As the pianoforte grew in popularity, women also became engaged as concert pianists. A somewhat strange situation developed for talented women musicians. While male instrumentalists had access to the less prominent medium of orchestral playing, women either remained in the private sphere or embarked upon public careers as soloists, and in the latter case they were vastly more in the limelight than orchestral players.

The profession of virtuoso pianist was the second arena, after singing, open to women musicians. Audiences were already used to professional women vocalists. For the acceptance of women pianists in the public domain, we can thank the convergence of a number of factors. We have already mentioned the long

tradition of women keyboard players in domestic circles. In addition, two cultural developments seem to have intertwined: the vogue of musical virtuosity became coupled to a romantic idolization of heroines. Women, deemed to be the emotional sex, were considered well suited to express romantic sentiments, and piano music was one of the vehicles used to express these sentiments.

The situation of all-male orchestras accompanying women soloists reflects a romantic image of men serving the idealized woman, the heroine. And indeed, top performers were greatly honored and treated as stars. The greatest star was Clara Schumann (1819-1896), who visited the Netherlands in 1853, 1855, 1863, 1876 and 1877. Dutch reviews often gave her extensive coverage, with a much shorter reference to her husband Robert (the composer).

Concert pianists were expected to perform at least one piece they themselves had written. This custom led to the appearance of the first significant group of women pianist-composers. Examples of well-known pianists who composed works for performance include Gertrude van den Bergh (1793-1840), Elizabeth Jeanne Broes (1795-1853), Clasine van Brussel (after 1806-?) and Madeleine J. Graever (1830 - ?).

As the popularity of the piano increased in the nineteenth century, and a burgeoning middle class sought to imitate the upper classes, the demand for music teachers also increased. Because the demand was greater than the supply, women were welcomed into the field of music pedagogy. These women provided a source of income for their

families, and could continue teaching if they remained single.

**Gertrude van den Bergh** is a good example. Like Baroness van Boetzelaer she lived in The Hague, but she was a member of the working class and much less privileged. She never married and had to earn her own living, spending long days teaching members of the House of Orange and other members of the nobility at two guilders per lesson. She also composed some pieces for her pupils and other works during her summer holidays, but unfortunately most of these works were never published and have been lost to posterity. One of her manuscripts that did survive is a *Lied ohne Worte* ('song without words'). Gertrude van den Bergh was the first composer in the Netherlands to write in this new genre.

By the end of the nineteenth century the number of women studying music had increased exponentially. This can be seen in statistics from 1888 until 1913, which compare the number of women and men who became certified through exams given by the *Maatschappij tot Bevordering der Toonkunst* (Society for the Advancement of Music) and the *Nederlandsche Toonkunstenaarsvereniging* (Dutch Musicians' Association). In this 25-year period the Society awarded 326 diplomas to 285 women and 41 men, while the Association awarded 968 diplomas to 806 women and 162 men. These women mostly majored in singing and piano, plus a few in violin, and one in piano tuning.

What did all these hundreds of women graduates do? Little research has been done in this area, but most likely the vast majority of the pianists went into teaching, at least

until they got married or could afford to stop. A small percentage of the vocalists worked in opera and oratorio productions, but the majority were teachers. Perhaps the best known is **Catharina van Rennes** (1858-1940), who founded her own singing school in Utrecht.

Women pedagogues needed teaching materials and soon began writing children's songs. Judging by the popularity of their songs, women well knew how to appeal to children, paying more attention than their male colleagues to what children would enjoy singing. Some songs were not only popular with children but also with adults, achieving the status of national hit tunes. Significantly, vocalists often incorporated these songs, with their early romantic Mendelssohnian flavour, into their recital programs, much to the enjoyment of Dutch audiences.

### *Orchestras*

Traditionally, orchestras often developed from city military bands or from the aforementioned *muziekcolleges*, both of which were organizations for men only. In Groningen, Haarlem, Arnhem and Utrecht, orchestras were formed from the *schutterij* or citizen soldiery.

As long as women stuck to singing and piano, orchestras could remain all-male affairs. But as women in increasing numbers at the end of the nineteenth century ventured into playing the harp, orchestras began hiring female harpists. The admission of women to orchestras was a slow process. The Concertgebouw Orchestra, for example, hired its first woman in 1890, and it would take seven years before the second woman was

hired, the cellist Cato van der Hoeven.

With little opportunity to interact with orchestras, it should not surprise us that many women composers limited themselves to writing chamber music. As Rhian Samuel remarked (*The Norton-Grove Dictionary of Women Composers*, New York: Norton, 1994: xiii):

While her domestic life has often limited practical opportunities for composing, even when she has managed to find the time and space for this activity, she has been far less able than her male peers to enjoy valuable interaction with orchestras and opera companies and to develop her technique (a situation which bears many parallels to that of women painters, barred in the nineteenth century from life-drawing classes). Her success in these larger media, particularly before the present day, should therefore be seen as doubly significant.

### *The number of women composers increases*

At the end of the nineteenth century the number of women composers began to rise. A number of social factors probably contributed to this increase. The demand for more music teachers and teaching materials, common to all of Europe, has already been mentioned as one factor. A second, specific to the Netherlands, is the cultural revival in the 1880s known as the *Tachtigers* Movement.

The authoritative Sem Dresden, in his *Het muziekleven in Nederland sinds 1880* (1923), linked this cultural revival to the increase in women composers, albeit in a footnote: "The fact that no longer only the male sex was composing surely justifies the above expressed opinion that the art of musical composition was making a comeback in the Netherlands."

A third factor contributing to the rise of women composers is the women's emancipation movement. As women became increasingly conscious of their lack of equal rights in the public domain, they began to organize themselves for the right to vote, for education and work. In 1898 this culminated in a national exhibition, the *Nationale Tentoonstelling Vrouwenarbeid* (National Women's Work Exhibition) held in The Hague. The exhibition committee commissioned Cornelia van Oosterzee (1863-1943) to write a cantata for the opening ceremony, which she herself conducted. Unfortunately, much of her music, including a symphony and an opera, has been lost, probably in the World War II bombing of Berlin, where she long resided.

In 1913 a second women's exhibition was held, this time in Amsterdam. A competition for a cantata to open the exhibition was organized. Six women submitted scores and **Bertha Frensel Wegener-Koopman** (1875-1953) was chosen. Although this cantata has not survived, many of her songs were published. Perhaps typically Dutch is her versatility with languages, as she is equally adept in her settings of German, French, English and Dutch poetry. A good example of her work is her setting of Rabindranath Tagore's poem "Do not go, my love."

At the turn of the twentieth century a number of Dutch women considered themselves to be professional composers. This can be seen from the fact that they became members of the 'Genootschap van Nederlandse Componisten', founded in 1911. Within five years eleven women became members: Catharina van Rennes, Hendrika van Tussenbroek (1854-1934), Henriette van Heukelom-van den Brandeler (1884-1985), Anna Lambrechts-Vos (1876-1931), Nelly van der Linden van Snelrewaard-Boudewijns (1869-1926), Gertruida Vogel-van Vladeracken (1880-1947), Anna Stibbe (1879-?), Cornelia van Oosterzee, Bertha Frensel Wegener-Koopman, Marie van Essen (?-?), and Manna de Wijs-Mouton (1872-1947).

By the 1930s the number of women composers had reached a new high. In 1936 Henk Badings published a book on Dutch contemporary composers, in which he named 96 composers; sixteen of these were women. Perhaps the best known was the pianist-composer **Henriëtte Bosmans** (1895-1952), whose output includes ten orchestral works. A flamboyant woman whose circle consisted mainly of Amsterdam musicians, her music enjoyed numerous performances.

### *Decline*

After World War II the number of women composers slowly declined. Factors contributing to this decrease include the post-war emphasis on family life and the extremely low percentage of women working outside the home. Those who were still composing grew older, while very few young women aspired to enter the profession. The proportion of Dutch women composers decreased

from about 15% to less than 2% in the 1980s.

An exception was **Tera de Marez Oyens** (1930-1996), a rather lone figure. A prolific composer, she explored various genres, as did many of her male contemporaries. Her earliest compositions included religious works such as choral songs and psalm settings. Raising her four children stimulated her to write educational works and children's operas. In 1978 she wrote a manual for school teachers, *Werken met moderne klanken*, a progressive series of short vocal or instrumental, mainly graphically notated, études. Her own workshops on contemporary music, which she continued to present throughout her career, proved her to be a talented teacher. In the 1960s she became interested in electronic music and studied with Gottfried M. Koenig at the Institute for Sonology in Utrecht. Many of her works show that she was often inspired by text. She also composed several large-scale dramatic works to texts by her second husband, the political scientist and philosopher Menachem Arnoni, including the oratorio *The Odyssey of Mr. Good-Evil* (1981).

In the 1980s Dutch conservatories increasingly began to attract foreign composition students. These foreigners included ambitious young women who often decided to stay in Holland after graduation. One of the reasons to establish the Netherlands as a home base is its excellent infrastructure for contemporary music. Many ensembles enjoy state funding and there is ample opportunity for compositional commissions and grants.

Just as at the end of the nineteenth century, the end of the twentieth also saw an increase

in the number of young Dutch women composers. Perhaps the second women's emancipation contributed indirectly to this growth. Two of these new composers are **Ig Henneman** (b.1945) and **Caroline Ansink** (b.1959).

Henneman, born in Haarlem, began her career as an orchestral musician. In 1978 she co-founded the first all-female rock band, F.C. Gerania, and wrote her first music for this group; in 1989 she founded the Ig Henneman Quartet and wrote all the music for it. Later she also founded the Henneman Tentet, consisting of a soprano and nine instruments. She is increasingly involved in developing a genre which lies somewhere between classical music and improvisation. She has set to music seven poems by Emily Dickinson, and poems about birds in six languages, and improvisations on medieval ballads by Francesco Landini. According to the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London: Macmillan, 2001), these works have not all been published, but they have been recorded.

Caroline Ansink was born in Amsterdam. She teaches flute at the Utrecht Conservatory and has received a number of awards for her compositions. Her output ranges from orchestral to chamber to choral works. She has set to music a wide range of poetry, from ancient Greek texts to Paul Celan and contemporary Dutch writers; her choice often reflects her hatred of social injustice. Her dramatic monologue *Ni Dieu, ni Diable*, about Joan of Arc, features a demanding soprano role accompanied by piano and percussion, which dialogue with the singer. Her work is expressive and has lyrical melodies, and she does not avoid tonality.

Currently the percentage of women composers is about 7%. Why is this figure still so low? One reason may be that music institutions are still dominated by men. True, women are now allowed to play in orchestras. But where are the women conductors? Where are the women impresarios, women publishers, women music directors, women board members, women managers? Why not require music organizations receiving government funding to fulfill a quota, specifying for instance that 15% of the music performed must be by women? Although such a proposal has little chance of being implemented, it is comparable to a constitutional amendment in India requiring 30% of the members of the Lower House of Parliament to be women.

It is certainly promising that the percentage of women currently studying composition in the Netherlands is much higher, for instance, 20% at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague and 30% at the Amsterdam Conservatory. These young women need our support. To ensure that women's voices may be heard is one of the goals of the Dutch Women and Music Foundation (website: [www.vrouwenmuziek.nl](http://www.vrouwenmuziek.nl)).

#### DISCOGRAPHY

of selected CDs with music by Dutch women composers

NM Classics 92018 Six Dutch women composers: Gertrude van den Bergh, Catharina van Rennes, Elisabeth Kuyper, Henriëtte Bosmans, Iet Stants and Tera de Marez Oyens. Visit the Internet site [www.muziekgroep.nl](http://www.muziekgroep.nl) for a listing of their CDs plus music samples.  
Bertha Frensel Wegener-Koopman (1874-

1953)

Tatlin Records TA 001: 24 songs in German, English, French and Dutch. Ingrid Kappelle, soprano, Miklos Schwalb, piano.

Anna Cramer (1873-1968)

Globe GLO 5128: Anna Cramer: Lieder. Rachel Ann Morgan, mezzo soprano, Maria Benoist, piano.

Henriëtte Bosmans (1895-1952):

1) NM Classics-special 92095: Henriëtte Bosmans: Concertstuk for flute and chamber orchestra (1929), Poème for cello and orchestra (1923), Concertino for piano and orchestra (1928).

2) Globe GLO 5183: "Henriëtte Bosmans and her circle": Julia Bronkhorst, soprano, and Maarten Hillenius, piano.

3) Tatlin Records TA 002: Chamber music by Henriëtte Bosmans and Lex van Delden.

Tera de Marez Oyens (1932-1996)

1) Composer's Voice CD 8702: Charon's Gift, Litany of the Victims of War, Sinfonia testimonial.

2) Marcato Keyboard MCD 189601: Concertos: Confrontations (piano), Linzer Concert (accordion) Structures and Dance (violin).

3) BV Haast 9211: From Death to Birth, Ballerina on a Cliff, Ambiversion, Vignettes, Trio, Dreams of Madness.

Ig Henneman (born 1945):

BV Haast Records distribution: WIG 02: "Ig Henneman Tentet plays Dickinson," a cycle of seven poems by Emily Dickinson (1830-1886).

Caroline Ansink (born 1959):  
Erasmus Muziek Producties WVH 159: "Oh  
beminnelijk litteken," Poems by Lucebert set  
to music by Caroline Ansink.