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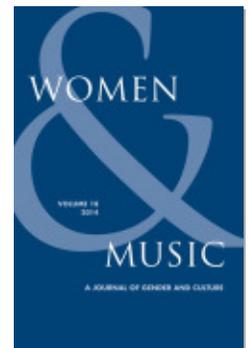
In Her Own Words: Conversations with Composers in the United States by Jennifer Kelly (review)

Jessica Rudman

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REVIEWS

In Her Own Words: Conversations with Composers in the United States. By Jennifer Kelly. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013. ix + 475 pp.

JESSICA RUDMAN

In the introduction to *In Her Own Words: Conversations with Composers in the United States*, Jennifer Kelly states that she asked each of her interviewees “whether she thought that there is a need for women-only concerts, festivals, and recordings” (6), a query that could easily be extended to books including only female composers. In the past two years, this controversial subject has received much debate in online new music circles due in part to articles on *NewMusicBox* and in the *New York Times*’s opinion series “The Score.” Throughout those writings and the present collection of interviews, three distinct perspectives appear on the existence of women-only concerts, recordings, books, and similar projects: the first views such activities as a potential counter-agent to poor representation in other venues; the second recognizes them as the celebration of a particular tradition within a larger community; and the third believes they actually contribute to the marginalization of women.

In Her Own Words grew out of the first position, yet the second underlies both the author’s attitude toward the project and the conversations she has with her subjects. In the introduction, Kelly includes an account of how she came to write the book, recalling:

As late as the 1980s in my high-school curriculum, women were not addressed as creators of music, and into the 1990s, when discussing women composers in college, the professors brought in “special” books. When I later became a professor myself, the standard textbooks still did not yet adequately represent my own gender; so I, too, brought in “special” books for the class. (2)

The author’s frustration with her limited exposure to female composers led her not to write a standard text better integrating women but rather to create another “special” book.

In Her Own Words—a book I believe is indeed special, extraordinary even, on many levels—contains twenty-five interviews that present a diverse overview of American women composers across the past eight decades. The book provides an unprecedented exploration of these composers’ music, experiences, philosophies, and more, with the goal of “bringing a more informed

performance to an audience and more informed discussion into the classroom” (1). With this collection, Kelly clearly hopes to ameliorate the ignorance concerning female composers that she herself experienced. She reveals: “Without the benefit of having studied women composers as a matter of course throughout my education, I mistakenly believed that the number of talented women in music was small and their few musical scores worthy of study were already on the library shelves” (2). While the situation may be improving, women are still not adequately represented in textbooks, libraries, concerts, or other outlets through which audiences learn about music. Ideally, this text and others like it will mark an important step toward greater inclusion of women in mainstream studies of works while also encouraging musicians to program more music by female composers.

Though Kelly intended the book to help correct the imbalance she sees, she also approached the project as a celebration of the unique women included. She chose to organize the interviews as if curating a concert, affording readers the opportunity to compare and contrast the views and experiences of the various composers. Each chapter focuses on a different woman and includes three parts: an overview, the interview itself, and a works list.¹ The overviews are short, beginning with a brief biography before moving on to a needlessly redundant summary of the ensuing conversation. The interviews are the heart of the book and, understandably, its greatest strength. Though in some places an interview seems to jump unexpectedly in a new direction or more follow-up would have been welcome, the author’s thorough preparation allowed her to conduct deep, thoughtful discussions with each composer, and she skillfully preserves each composer’s unique voice while highlighting common threads between the interviews. The diversity of opinions expressed on those recurring themes allows the book to be an excellent starting point for discussions on a variety of issues, including some hotly debated topics related to the “woman composer”: the value of all-female projects, whether gender influences compositional voice, and what role one’s sex plays in one’s career.

For the most part, the artists featured in the book were—not surprisingly, since they agreed to be interviewed—in favor of ventures focused on women, yet their reasons for supporting such projects varied greatly. Some draw attention to the need for those activities in counteracting the deficit of females in nongendered venues, while others focus on showcasing women’s music as a unique tradition within the larger classical community. Laura Karpman and Tania León both argue that more exposure for women and minorities will help

¹ Though Kelly herself mentions in the introduction that programming music by female composers was a challenge for her because “recordings were frequently unavailable or unknown” (2), no discographies are included. While many of the pieces listed in the book may not be commercially recorded, excerpts or full recordings for a large number could be found online. A companion website that includes a link to each composer’s homepage as well as a list (or, even better, a searchable database) of works with publication information and details about any commercial recordings would be a helpful addition to any future editions of the book.

young people become interested in classical music, with Karpman emphasizing that “girls and young women must see that other women compose and that composition is a possibility for them” (324). Chen Yi recalls the empowering experience of hearing the Women’s Philharmonic perform for the National Organization for Women (111), and Libby Larsen points out the role of all-female events in building a community of composers who can then support and encourage one another (307). When asked about feminist musicology, she later states: “Sure, it has a place, because it continues to create dialogue. Does it give us insight into gender and music? I don’t think so. Not music itself—meaning pitch, motion, architecture, and emotional connection. Yet it has caused many people to focus on music that maybe would have not focused on it in any analytical way” (309).

Larsen clearly expresses the position that women-only projects have value in balancing the gender gap of mainstream classical music ventures. Hasu Patel, on the other hand, understands such activities to be necessary because there are essential distinctions between the work of women and men. She explains that “women musicians have tenderness in their compositions where men musicians have power, which shows the ego of men” (148). Pauline Oliveros also feels women can write music vastly different from that composed by men, stating: “More and more women are being present, in making music, composing, or creating, and we’re doing it differently. Some of them are not—some are simply replicating what has gone before—but the ones who are not are creating new pathways” (157). When one believes music written by women is ultimately distinct from that written by men, all-female concerts and recordings take on the new importance of presenting a communal identity encoded in the music itself.

While many of the composers included in Kelly’s book do not subscribe to that belief, they still see value in projects focused on women due to the unique experiences faced by members of their sex. Gender, along with race and a number of other characteristics, contributes to one’s identity and thus can affect one’s compositional voice. Gabriela Lena Frank explains: “If I were a man, I think my music would be different, but not from some female gene. It’s more the experiences I had as a woman traveling in Latin America as opposed to a man traveling in Latin America, for instance” (72). A factor such as gender that influences compositional voice can be used effectively as a theme for a project, highlighting commonalities and/or revealing individualities between members of a certain demographic. Women-only opportunities, therefore, make sense alongside such common phenomena as concerts showcasing music by composers from a specific geographic region, score calls soliciting works from those who belong to a certain religion, or ensembles dedicated to performing pieces only by composers under a certain age.

Following a similar line of thought, Pamela Z flips the issue on its head, asking: “The more interesting question to me is, Is there something special about male music? Because no one ever asks it from that angle. No one ever

says, “Well, what is male music like?” (223). While the likelihood of someone curating an explicitly all-male concert or festival seems unlikely today, perhaps in the future the gender gap will narrow enough that a project featuring just male composers will be a novelty, and “men’s music” will be rightly perceived as one of many equal strands in the larger tapestry of classical music.

Mary Jane Leach also brings up the idea of all-male concerts, yet she does so in one of the few clear arguments against women-only opportunities found in *In Her Own Words*. She explains: “Unless you have high-quality, name-brand composers on the bill, [any project only including women] just seems kind of ‘ghettoizing.’ People don’t pay attention to it. . . . It needs to be integrated. If it is ghettoized, there is always a backlash. If you can program all-women’s concerts, you can program all-men’s” (433). She expresses a viewpoint otherwise absent in the book: inequality is still present in contemporary classical music, yet it can only be remedied by correcting the gender imbalance in concerts and recordings whose content is not limited by the sex of the composer.

One wonders if any composers elected not to participate in Kelly’s book because of its gender bias. Some people feel women-centered activities are outdated and can contribute to the marginalization of female composers, leading them to avoid such projects. Amy Beth Kirsten’s provocative *NewMusicBox* article “The ‘Woman Composer’ Is Dead” articulates such a perspective, declaring that the label’s “very use implies that the corresponding body of work is of a lesser quality.”² Kirsten explains that the gender gap has been closing in recent decades as more women are working in composition, more of their works are being programmed, and more young composers feel their sex is not a barrier to composing. She asserts: “Ask young composers if they feel gender is an obstacle in their personal quest to make art. No doubt you will be greeted with total confusion and a look that betrays the thought, ‘Does not compute.’”

Several of the interviews from *In Her Own Words* contain similar observations. For example, Jennifer Higdon states: “Now, when I do master classes with young people, a lot of times they’re startled if there isn’t a woman involved. The generation change is happening so fast with women, minorities of any sort, and even being gay. I think for the younger generation these are all nonissues” (54). Janika Vandervelde expresses a related sentiment when she explains: “I’ve worked with so many young women who are coming of age, and it’s true that they don’t have a focused interest in matters of equality” (413).

However, all of the views found in *In Her Own Words* on how young composers—and by young I mean under age thirty-five—feel about gender are secondhand, since Kelly’s otherwise thorough sampling includes no women in that age group. Though she at one point asks a subject how her experiences as a woman starting her career in the twenty-first century would be different from those of previous generations, none of the composers in the book can offer a first-person answer to that question (307). Including at least one interviewee

2 Amy Beth Kirsten, “The ‘Woman Composer’ Is Dead,” *NewMusicBox*, March 19, 2012, <http://www.newmusicbox.org>.

younger than thirty-five would fill that hole and provide a more complete picture of the effect gender issues currently have on female composers.

While the view that young women no longer focus on questions of gender may be valid, some composers suggest that such an attitude may in fact be the result of naïveté, recalling how they themselves held but eventually moved beyond such a perspective. Karpman recounts:

At that point in my life, I wasn't aware of sexism. I was like a lot of young women then and perhaps now, in that I didn't think about it; it wasn't part of my reality. I felt everything was possible for women. But at Sundance, there was a conversation that really stunned me. Later, an agent who was there came up to me and said, "Why didn't you ask any questions?" And I said, "Because it was so exclusionary. I just figured there was no room for me." (325)

Until Karpman personally had experienced sexism, she did not realize it was still a relevant issue, a pattern that is probably not uncommon.

In a recent post she wrote for "The Score," Kristin Kuster provides an interesting complement to Karpman's story, confessing her initial avoidance of women-only activities and explaining:

I learned this attitude. I learned it from a handful of female composers 5 to 10 years my senior. They believed that talking about our gender in relation to our work would perpetuate the distinction between male and female composers, and therefore pave right over all the ground we had gained in our efforts to break through the gender normative white-male hegemony that is this field.

O.K. I agreed, and for years I perpetuated a non-perpetuation of gender distinction. Today, I vehemently disagree with the notion that if we stop talking about something, it ceases to exist. Today, I believe we must cast a spotlight on facts and evidence that illuminate[s] the gender imbalance of composers with visibly active presences in our field.³

Kuster's changed attitude toward closing the gender gap and Karpman's story of self-realization serve as cautionary tales against the belief that activism can stop now that things are moving in the right direction, and their discussions provide a counterpoint to Kirsten's stance that efforts to create gender equality in classical music have reached a critical mass where continued motion toward balance is ensured.

Regardless, one's thoughts on the question of whether (or how much) the gender gap remains a problem are ultimately unrelated to the value of concerts, recordings, and activities open only to women. If one believes steps must be taken to further narrow the gender gap, women-only opportunities can repre-

³ Kristin Kuster, "Taking Off My Pants," *New York Times*, July 17, 2013, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com>.

sent one such step. Alternately, if one feels such work is no longer necessary, all-female projects—rather than serving to marginalize—can take on a celebratory function, with gender as one of many possible organizational themes. During her interview for *In Her Own Words*, Joan Tower explains:

To me it's like a research thing. It's like going to a festival of electronic music to learn more about the latest technology. It's a subject, and if you're part of that subject, I think it's important to know that history. I think at a women's festival you can do that. . . . I never got the connection between the word "marginalization" and women. The fact that it's a gender-related subject to me is not the issue. The issue is that women have had a different experience than men, different history, different everything. It's a subject for research and understanding, and the more you know about it, the more tools you have to talk about it and understand where you came from. I think there's a hugely important thing here. (17–18)

In Tower's view, music written by women deserves study as one stream in the history of classical music, regardless of any gender politics involved. Doing so in the context of an all-female festival, recording, or book is perfectly logical and need not be feared as ghettoizing.

In addition to expressing her view that projects focused on women are inherently marginalizing, Kirsten's article also includes the problematic assumption that programming based on quality and programming based on gender are mutually exclusive. She states:

It's commendable to be aware of and in support of all composers striving to make art, but our first responsibility is to identify and program music that is excellent—which of course has nothing to do with gender. I would hate to think that my work had been programmed simply because I'm a woman—and in fact, I've declined concert and recording opportunities that were gender-based.

It would be a great detriment to the field if suddenly, in the 21st century, when we've largely transcended the issue of gender, to start focusing on it again. Neither art nor artist is served by segregation—even if it's well intended. The moment we begin programming based on gender, instead of excellence, is the moment we begin to go backwards.

Having been involved in organizing a women composers festival for a number of years now, I can safely say that finding music of the highest quality has always been our priority, and I would imagine that those curating other women-only opportunities would express a similar dedication to presenting the best work possible. Kelly, in the introduction to *In Her Own Words*, maintains that she selected composers for her book "whose contributions are well known in scholarly circles . . . or within the narrower confines of their musical genres" (3). When discussing her curatorial work, Shulamit Ran similarly explains: "It has

been incredibly easy to program music by women composers because there is such a wealth of wonderful music being written by women” (37). Even Kirsten herself points out that “there is no shortage of new music composers, no shortage of excellent ones, and no shortage of women.” Finding enough outstanding music by women to fill a concert, a festival, or an entire book is not a problem—in fact, the difficulty is often that there are more excellent works than can be included in any given project.

The idea that excellent music is the best advocate for female composers runs throughout *In Her Own Words*. Emphasis on the quality of music by women—both as a programming concern and as part of one’s own work ethic—can be found in Kelly’s introduction and many of the interviews. A number of the composers echo thoughts similar to Higdon’s assertion: “When I’m writing, I don’t think about the fact that I’m a woman composer writing this. I often think, ‘Is this the best I can do?’ I’m only thinking about the quality of the music” (53). Going beyond the question of an individual’s artistic integrity, Frank makes quality an issue of responsibility. Her comments reflect a sense of advocacy and cultural duty found in many of the book’s conversations: “Say you have a situation where you have shallow music being written by a woman of color, and shallow music being written by a young hot-shot white guy. I’m more bothered by the first scenario. . . . Because it’s a missed opportunity. . . . She had a chance to overcome skepticism that is in place against a certain demographic” (64). For Frank, it is more important for women (and minorities in general) to adhere to the most stringent standards because of the prejudice they may face. Only by creating music of the highest caliber can a female composer satisfy both her devotees and her critics. Yet one cannot simply take the *Field of Dreams* attitude that if women write outstanding music, listeners will flock to them, and they will receive the recognition they deserve. This music needs to reach its audience, and all-female concerts, recordings, and books are some of the possible avenues for generating the exposure necessary for composers to have successful careers.

Ultimately, we—as women, men, musicians, educators, and members of society—must take responsibility for the current situation and work toward equal representation through women-only ventures and greater integration into nongendered projects. Tower calls us to action:

We’re told, “This is a very famous composer, so who are you to not like this?” We’re put into a passive evaluative position because we’re told this music is very important music, and if you don’t understand it, then that’s your problem. . . . And then that brings in the women issue, which we’re coming full circle to. “This woman isn’t really known. There must be something wrong with Fanny because she hasn’t done very well.” Who is going to replace that idea that Fanny Mendelssohn is [not] an important composer? Who is going to bring that idea up to fill in that historical gap? (22)

Who will end the silence about women composers in standard music textbooks? Who will take steps to close the gender gap that still exists in our musical community? We will.

Anthology of Text Scores. By Pauline Oliveros. Edited by Samuel Golter and Lawton Hall. Kingston NY: Deep Listening Publications, 2013. 218 pp.

DOUGLAS COHEN

On the morning of September 11, 2002, I found myself participating in a performance of Pauline Oliveros's *The Wheel of Life* (1979). The emotional wounds were still strong for most New Yorkers on this first anniversary of the fall of the World Trade Center. As the bells rang at the time each plane crashed into the towers, my friends and I lay on our backs in a circle, heads facing inward, and listened. The listening led to synchronized breathing, the breathing to sounding, but we always came back to listening. Through this composition we were able to observe and share this moment of sorrow and remembrance while expressing our feelings communally.

The Wheel of Life is one of over one hundred compositions from the 1970s to the 2000s collected in Pauline Oliveros's *Anthology of Text Scores*, published by Deep Listening Publications. The common thread throughout is that it all begins with listening. This applies not only to a work like *The Wheel of Life*, which belongs to Oliveros's discipline known as Sonic Meditation, but also to those pieces composed expressly for concert performance or with specific musicians in mind, like *Thirteen Changes* (1986) for the experimental violinist/composer Malcolm Goldstein and *Sound Fishes for an Orchestra of Any Instruments* (1992).¹

The ever-present reminder to listen in Oliveros's work is not surprising to anyone familiar with her development of the practice known as Deep Listening. Similarly important but perhaps not as readily apparent is how the circle has been a central organizing image throughout her career. I had been aware of the presence of circles in Oliveros's work since studying the score to *The Wheel of Time for String Quartet and Digital Synthesizer* (1984), based on the Tibetan Buddhist *Kalachakra*, or reading *The Grand Buddha Marching Band* (1981), with its spiral mandala for a score.² The significance of the circle, however, has never been as apparent as here, and part of the credit needs to go to Lawton Hall for the expert design and layout of this book, with the beautifully rendered mandala score to the composition *Wind Horse* (1990) on the cover.

Mandala-like circles are a recurring image throughout this anthology, from the mellifluous *Lullaby for Daisy Pauline* (1980), with its singing of

1 Pauline Oliveros, *Sonic Meditations* (Baltimore MD: Smith Publications, 1972).

2 Pauline Oliveros, *The Wheel of Time*, *MusikTexte Zeitschrift für Neue Musik* 7 (December 1984): 17–23; Oliveros, *Deep Listening Pieces* (Kingston NY: Deep Listening Publications, 1990), 19–20.