

## ESSAY

MILENA GAMMAITONI<sup>1</sup>**“LE MUSICISTE” STUDY DAYS  
FOR AN EDUCATION IN AND THE SPREAD  
OF A STOLEN STORY**

## Abstract

The initiative of the study days dedicated to the history of female musicians, now in its ninth edition, came to light in 2015 due to the need to raise awareness of and re-evaluate the female identity of a social, cultural and artistic nature often forgotten by European musical historiography. The ban on performing in public after marriage, the preclusion from musical positions and careers, the lack of public institutions that permitted the creation of educational pathways for women equal to those of the other sex, have all conditioned the development of female musical art and sometimes even leading to its obsolescence even though many women were protagonists, authoritative professionals and attentive witnesses of the musical society of their time. This legacy, which determined the cancellation of an important artistic legacy from the collective memory, and come down to the present day, can be reversed only thanks to a thorough knowledge of the female contribution to the music of the past and present.

Keywords: women, composers, sociology, symbolic violence

The ‘Le Musiciste’ [ENG: Female Musicians] study days, now in their eighth edition, stand out with their unique approach. They propose the rediscovery, experiential and educational exploration of works by women composers, conductors, teachers, and great performers. This is based on a fruitful exchange between scholarly and artistic research, and on interactions between teachers and students. In recent years, female musicians, both past and present, have emerged, many of whom, although famous in their day,

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have left no trace on historical memory. The various contributions made during the seminar, symbolic of the transition from theory to practice, were enriched by shows and concerts featuring qualified interpreters engaged in the performance of music by women composers, often presented for the first time in Rome, even in Italy. These works, excluded from what we call the mainstream, have never been considered part of listeners' musical heritage, much less included in the curricula of professional musical institutions. This historical amnesia has given rise to obsolescence and misinformation that has frequently fuelled prejudices regarding their intrinsic value.

Acting as the catalyst of a circuit which, to date, has succeeded in involving a growing number of scholars from different disciplines as well as female musicians, the project represents another research-based challenge. It is aimed at defining points of encounter and comparison between musicology, sociology, history, pedagogy, psychology, anthropology, compositional and interpretative art. This interdisciplinary approach has turned the cultural message it conveys into performative implementation.



Photo 1.

Source: <https://www.milenagammaitoni.it/le-compositrici/>

Since 2016, a photographic and documentary exhibition (36 panels) dedicated to women composers of various eras and nations, curated by the Associazione Toponomastica femminile [ENG: Female Toponymy

Association], has been put on show during various national and international<sup>2</sup> events and periodically rearranged within premises belonging to Rome's Roma Tre State University (Department of Educational Sciences and Palladium Theatre), as well as in the Italian capital's Santa Cecilia Conservatory (2023). In 2020, the exhibits were translated into English and French and made available to the public at the headquarters of the EESC (European Economic and Social Committee) in Brussels.



Photo 2.

Source: <https://www.milenagammaitoni.it/le-compositrici/>

In recent years, the Pedagogy of Expression Laboratory and Theatrical Company of the Department of Educational Sciences, under the direction of Professor Gilberto Scaramuzzo, has staged performances of bodily mimesis, performing live to music by women composers of the past and

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<sup>2</sup> This association, presenting its section of the permanent exhibition regarding female composers, won the Civil Society Award in January 2020, awarded in Brussels by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) in 2019. In 2023, the panels were exhibited at Rome's Santa Cecilia Music Conservatory. The authors of the panels exhibited are Milena Gammaitoni, Orietta Caianiello, Angela Annesse, Francesca Pellegrini, Mauro Zennaro, Katuscia Carnà, Edmondo Grassi and Arianna Marziali.

present. These performances, presented during the last two editions of the Conference, were the result of the hard work and dedication of students from some of Rome's senior secondary schools: the "Farnesina" Musical Lycée, the "Confalonieri – De Chirico" Artistic Lycée, the "Leopoldo Pirelli" Linguistic Lycée, the "Roberto Rossellini" Cine TV Multimedia Institute. The initiative was part of the 'Le Musiciste PCTO' training course, a collaborative effort promoted by the Roma Tre University's Department of Educational Sciences.<sup>3</sup>



Photo 3.

Source: <https://www.milenagammaitoni.it/le-compositrici/>

## ON THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF WOMEN COMPOSERS AND MUSICIANS

A recent booklet entitled *Le grandi compositrici della musica classica* [ENG: Great women composers of classical music] accompanied by recordings of music by Hildegard of Bingen, Marianna Martinez, Fanny Mendelssohn, Augusta Holmès, Cécile Chaminade and Ethel Smyth, ushered in a new phase in the education of children, becoming an exemplum for the updating of

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<sup>3</sup> Coordinated by Milena Gammaitoni, Fridanna Maricchiolo, Orietta Caianiello, Gilberto Scaramuzzo and teachers from the lycées involved: Cristina Nocchi (for Rome's *Farnesina* Musical Lycée), Antonietta Biondi (for Rome's *De Chirico* Artistic Lycée), Stefania Lepore (for Rome's *Perelli* linguistic Lycée).

educational pathways and curricula. Not that there is any dearth of essays, encyclopedias, or informative materials made available by musicologists, musical foundations, associations or festivals dedicated to women's history and their present position in music. Internationally, since the 1980s, independent research has been interwoven with institutional recognition by some major publishers. Despite the exponential growth of studies dedicated to the excellence of women composers of art music, Italian historiography still struggles a lot to recover and include them in compulsory educational curricula. Therefore, these Study Days are an expression of the substance, form and action aimed at overcoming that historical narrative, which often relegates women to a role regulated by total social control.

This monolithic narrative pervades centuries of universal history as a form of symbolic violence elevated to the status of a cultural and mental system, legitimized since the era of early encyclopedism and specialization within the various disciplines, where handbooks of 'bon ton' set down in writing the roles and statuses of women, deciding to omit their works from the history of science, scholarship, culture and the arts, so that genius and rebellious behaviour might not become a generalized model to be emulated.



Photo 4.

Source: <https://www.milenagammaitoni.it/le-compositrici/>

Until the 1970s, Italian women could not go out alone. In the past, there were some rare cases of women who enjoyed greater freedom of movement, like Idlegard von Bingen in the Middle Ages, who was permitted by

the Pope to preach in public, something forbidden to women at the time. She was also allowed to travel through territories outside of her Monastery. Even today, a woman walking alone on the street feels she may fall prey to intrusive, aggressive, even violent forms of attention. In 2020, 77% of 1,057 respondents said they had experienced some degree of street harassment (See Calabresi 2024). Women appear and disappear in history: they are present in monographs and essays, they are absent from manuals, those used to educate the new generations. Despite an impressive monographic production, it happens with the history of ideas (philosophy, sociology, psychology, less so in anthropology). They vanish from the history of the arts (literature, theatre, music, painting, architecture, sculpture, media). For example, even if Caterina Percoto and Sibilla Aleramo appear at times in some anthologies of Italian literature, in the Italian music-history manuals used in Italy's Conservatories, there is almost no trace of women composers, however, widely cited in the dictionaries and anthologies of other Western countries, like the *New Grove of Music* where we find 900 mentions and in the *Oxford Library* which includes 1,500. This state of affairs is tantamount to a paradoxical hiatus of cognitive dissonance.

Until the revolutionary feminist uprisings of the twentieth century, with the exception of some brief moments in the history of France and England. European women did not enjoy civil and political rights unless they were rulers. They could not travel alone, study, work, inherit, bear witness in court, vote, divorce or have a legal abortion. Whatever their social class, all women, including artists, had a guardian who made decisions for them throughout their entire lifetimes, and even when the law formalized the freedom to act, for decades women continued to live under the guidance and social control of fathers, brothers, husbands. Women performed music professionally only if they came from families of artists, while for most of the others, musical practice remained an amateur accomplishment, something that was socially accepted because it was supposed to enhance so-called 'femininity.' After the experience of the Venetian hospitals that flourished mainly during the Baroque period and which, however, possessed characteristics peculiar to the charitable instruction of girls from very poor social backgrounds,<sup>4</sup> some French, German and English conservatories began admitting women to orchestral rehearsal and composition

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<sup>4</sup> On the teaching of music in Venetian hospitals, see, among others, Berdes (1993).

classes, but only in 1870. Before this date, the Paris Conservatory, founded in 1795, and the Royal Academy of Music in London, which opened in 1823, accepted women, who however could attend courses at different times and days than men; their curricula were reduced ('especially organised for their requirements'<sup>5</sup>) compared to those of their male colleagues. Furthermore, they were not allowed to study certain instruments (such as the 'cello or some of the wind instruments), because these entailed physical positions considered improper for females.



Photo 5.

Source: <https://www.milenagammaitoni.it/le-compositrici/>

The increase in the number of conservatories subsequently favored the creation of places for women: musicians such as Marie Pleyel, Pauline Viardot and Louise Farrenc (Professor at the Paris Conservatory for thirty years) had the opportunity to make their work known, both as educators and performers. Among the many significant female musicians we feel bound to mention are composers Maria Szymanowska, Clara Wieck Schumann, Louise Adolphe Le Beau, and Agathe Backer-Grøndal. Around the

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<sup>5</sup> This reference is to the regulations of the Leipzig Conservatory, founded in 1873, which, although based on principles of gender equality, foresaw a different number of years of attendance for the two sexes studying composition. See Reich (1991, 150).

end of the nineteenth century, education became accessible to people from various social backgrounds, and new female composers emerged, such as Augusta Holmès, Cécile Chaminade, and Ethel Smyth. However, every nation had a different history and followed a different institutional route. Although they did not come from aristocratic backgrounds, most of the European female composers who managed to emerge professionally were French and English. In Germany, Austria, Italy and Spain, female musicians belonged to an elite and generally attended schools closely linked to court or the “ton.” When they became professionals, their works were prevented from circulating freely. At the end of the nineteenth century, the director of Milan’s Conservatory, Antonio Bazzini, publicly shared with Giuseppe Martucci, director of Naples’ San Pietro a Majella Conservatory, perplexities regarding the ‘question of females in composition classes.’ He admitted, however, that despite everything, the only candidate worthy of admission to the year’s class was a woman: Antonietta Gàmbara Untersteiner.<sup>6</sup>

However, as women were prevented from belonging to national and operatic orchestras, some decided, independently, to form female ensembles and orchestras, of which one of the first examples was the Wiener Damen Orchester, founded in 1867 by Josephine Weinlich Amann.<sup>7</sup>

In short, female musicians have been subject to censorship and prejudice, tarred with the brush of ghettoizing and marginalizing stereotypes, so much so that they have been stigmatized as examples of a triple kind of deviance: women rebelling against the customs of the time, women who practice an art considered marginal compared to the practitioners of other arts,<sup>8</sup> of being artists, therefore traditionally deviant or at best extravagant individuals. Surprisingly, it is true that most of them came from families of artists and from socially elitist conditions, where they led a fairly traditional private life: they got married and, while studying and creating musical works, they became mothers, they opened schools, taught in conservatories and had their works performed.

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<sup>6</sup> See Carrer (2012, 4–5).

<sup>7</sup> The Viennese Ladies Orchestra was the first to tour Europe and America, in 1871, where it achieved enormous success, providing a model for the numerous American women’s orchestras created between the 19th and 20th centuries, such as the Ladies Elite Orchestra of New York, the Los Angeles Women’s Orchestra and the Boston Fadette Lady Orchestra.

<sup>8</sup> In Italy, for example, music has always been treated as a marginal subject in state-school curricula, thus remaining an elitist discipline.



In the 1980s, Joanna Russ, a science fiction writer, published a sociological essay, *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, where she analysed many of the social dynamics which forced women writers either to remain outside of history, as a denial of agency, or falsely re-categorized them and therefore downgraded them. They were not permitted to enter the canon or create new ones because of mainstreaming, or the stigma of deviance to which they were subjected.

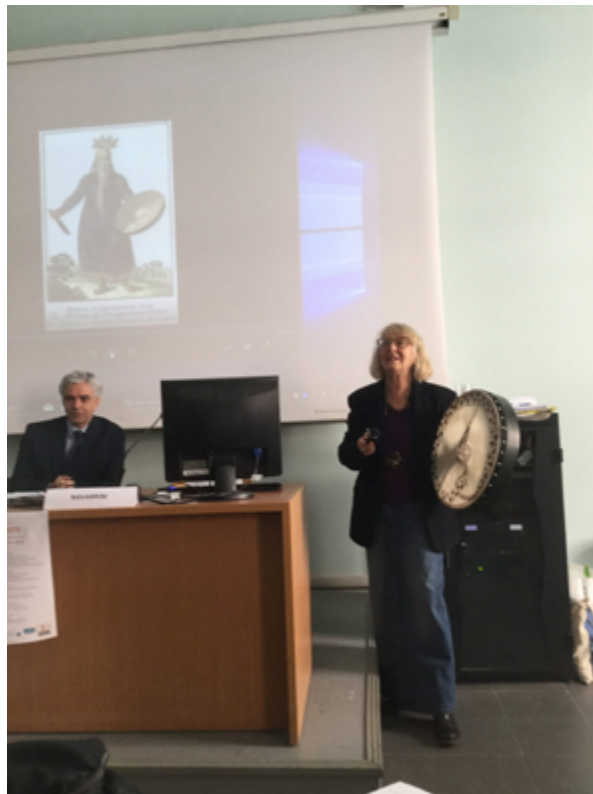


Photo 6.

Source: <https://www.milenagammaitoni.it/le-compositrici/>

Censorship and/or underestimation of the value of women's works not only strongly influence the building of the identity of both sexes who, right from their school years, enter the world of knowledge, convinced they have no historical identity behind them sedimented, also by the presence of women. These constraints also legitimize a passive kind of absence which normalizes symbolic violence.

One example is “The Rape of the Sabine Women” which should not be told and celebrated as a legendary stage in the development of Rome, without clearly explaining that it involved the kidnapping and rape of young women, and their forced marriages to favor the demographic development of the city.

The myth of the raping, inseminating God legitimizes authoritarian and violent power over women and in the long history of patriarchy has accustomed women to believe in a destiny of inferiority and fragility, of always finding themselves at the mercy of probable violence.

In actual fact, we live immersed in social and public forms of communication that sum this symbolic violence up rather well: from the streets of our cities, to advertising, to social media<sup>9</sup>, everywhere we look we see images and definitions of female roles that continue to transmit traditional stereotypes, still strongly present in the majority of children’s stories.

Let us begin with the streets we pass through every day: l’Associazione Toponomastica femminile [ENG: the Female Toponymy Association] has surveyed the maps of the whole of Italy only to find that only 5% of the country’s streets and squares are named after women. By comparison, 40% are named after men. Of Rome’s 16,079 streets and squares, 659 are dedicated to women, often in the city’s outskirts. Fifty-six of these are named after the Madonna, 89 after beatified women, saints and martyrs, 25 after nuns, 29 after benefactresses, 92 after women of letters, 17 after female scientists, 75 after women from showbusiness, 245 after female artists, 135 after female historical figures, 77 after female mythological figures, seven after legendary females, two after women athletes, five after businesswomen, 33 after women associated with local traditions (e.g. Via delle Convertite or Via delle Zoccolette). Streets, roads, lanes, and squares named after female musicians are always found in marginal areas of the city: in Rome, the few there are located inside Villa Pamphili. This simple fact, drawn from our daily lives, spent in places that are especially male-oriented, acts upon the unconscious level of our minds and normalizes the symbolic violence that denies visibility to women’s works.

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<sup>9</sup> In Europe, one woman out of 10 has been subjected to cyber violence since she was 15. There is a galaxy of groups, forums, sites and chats that are growing and fuelling contempt towards the female gender. Chats dedicated to rape culture appear on Telegram in particular.

There are images of dismembered or forgotten Goddesses all over the world: in India, among the Sumerians and in Mexico, in Old Europe. Their destruction and disappearance represent a departure from a world that revolves around a Goddess, where the dismemberment is always attributed to a male god who, in every culture, has replaced the Goddess. In India, Indra killed the Goddess and scattered her body parts all over the countryside; the places where these fell became sanctuaries where the Goddess is still venerated today; in Babylon, the hero Gilgamesh killed the dark Goddess Tiamat and scattered her limbs to create a new world. In Mexico, the war god Huitzilipoltli killed his sister, the moon goddess Coyolxauqui, and threw her shattered body off a mountaintop to show he had triumphed over her. The extermination in Europe of nine million witches who were actually healers,<sup>10</sup> during the age of burnings at the stake are pages that fail, far too often, to appear in history books. The Age of Enlightenment put an end to the cult of the Mother Goddess, present for millennia in Old Europe, thus contributing to collective and individual forms of amnesia which continue to exist, forging today's collective consciousness or unconsciousness, a fact testified by the femicides that occur every day all over the world. One hundred and twenty women were killed in 2023 in Italy. One every 12 minutes worldwide. Statistically, more women die from domestic violence or revenge from an ex-partner than from war and famine.

Unfortunately, very little has changed since Elena Gianini Belotti in her *Dalla parte delle bambine* complained that authors of children's books limited themselves to providing young readers with the same models as those proposed by the family and the social environment, despite the fact that publishers in a self-regulatory codex of 1999, undertook to avoid sexism and stereotypes and provide balanced representations of differences.

The first datum that strikes one is the apparent prevalence of male protagonists, 59.1% (even 74% in Raffaello Scuola texts), against 37% of stories with female protagonists. When adventure stories alone are taken into consideration, the protagonists are males 72% of the time (Biemmi & Leonelli 2017). The professions attributed to male protagonists are

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<sup>10</sup> The Italian terms *strega* and *megea*, meaning "witch" and "crone," derive from a root meaning sacred woman or sacred grove. The English word "witch" derives from "wicca" meaning knowledgeable or wise. On the contrary, "crone" has a negative meaning; it comes from Middle English, via Middle Dutch: *croonje*, *caroonje* 'carcass, old ewe' from Old Northern French *caroigne* 'carrion' and means "cantankerous woman."

50 compared to the 15 carried out by women. Among the former, we find kings, knights, masters, wizards, squires, writers, doctors and poets. At the same time, women are primarily teachers, followed in descending order by witches or sorceresses, maids, doctors, painters, seamstresses, secretaries, managers, dancers, news readers, gardeners, housekeepers, beauticians...

Amidst the prevalent gender bias, there are some rare signs of change. Instances where little girls' build a barometer,' conduct scientific experiments, play a musical instrument, or compose music, offer a glimmer of hope and potential for further progress.

The journey is a long one. It began in certain intellectual circles, at several universities, and within some associations. It prompted new editorial policies aimed at counteracting a mentality that takes refuge in comfortable ignorance and is responsible for a veritable cultural delay (Paternoster 2021).

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