

*Creating a More Inclusive Industry:
The Alliance for Women Film Composers*

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Abstract: This case examines the obstacles women film composers face because of their gender. Throughout history, women in the West have been excluded from the musical canon because of a lack of access to resources and education that would allow them to have a career in composition. As a result, the musical canon lacks the unique musical perspectives that could have been generated by women and contributed to an enrichment of Western culture. Today, women composers continue to face challenges in higher education, facing gender discrimination from within music departments. Those that continue with a career in music beyond college face discrepancies in annual earnings compared to men. They experience a lack of mentorship, sexual harassment, difficulty maintaining a work-life balance, tokenism, a lack recognition for their work, as well as isolation. All of these factors contribute to the low numbers of women working as film composers. The text raises the question of who the responsibility for change should fall to. Should it fall to the men in more powerful positions in these studios and films? Or should it fall to the women themselves, who may know better what should be done to make the film industry a more welcoming environment for them? In the face of these obstacles, some of the women have attempted to create communities through social media, yet these communities are only a small step towards creating change and inclusion in a male-dominated field. In 2014, composers Lolita Ritmanis, Laura Karpman, and Miriam Cutler created the Alliance for Women Film Composers as an attempt to realize this desired change.

Where are the Women Film Composers?

Film scoring is the art of writing music in sync to visuals. Though extremely competitive, this field offers an artistically and financially rewarding career for a composer. Composers can be creative in their music writing, and a film also offers a means through which wider audiences can experience their work (Leach 2010). From 2013-2016, only 1-2% of composers working on the top 250 films at the box office were women (Burlingame 2016). This statistic is the lowest of any below-the-line¹ job in the film industry. This discrepancy is not due to a lack of female composers, but a lack opportunity. Women composers do not have the means to gain the prestige, awards, and financial benefits experienced by their male counterparts (Burlingame 2016). They face obstacles perpetuated by history, education, as well as from within the industry. Working on behalf of all women composers, in 2014, composers Lolita Ritmanis, Laura Karpman and Miriam Cutler,

¹ Below the line refers to members of production that are not script writers, producers, directors, actors, or casting.

founded the Alliance for Women Film Composers (AWFC) to attempt to solve the issue of representation for women composers (Walters 2018).

The Journey to the AWFC

Lolita Ritmanis was introduced to music at a young age. Her parents would often take her to concerts to ensure that she was exposed to music (Walters 2018). Her older sister was a concert pianist and taught her piano in the earlier stages of her life. As she advanced in her piano education, she began to improvise, and her parents were quick to encourage her creativity (Walters 2018).

At age 11, she began writing music to be performed by different ensembles in her community. After high school, she thought she wanted to become a singer/songwriter, so she moved to Los Angeles to pursue this career (Walters 2018). While attending Dick Grove School of Music in LA, Ritmanis realized that the lifestyle involved in becoming a performer did not appeal to her. She instead discovered a love for television and film music and working with larger orchestras, drawn to the ways in which the marriage between the visuals and the audio can elicit emotion from an audience. While attending Dick Grove, she learned under the instruction of several working composers and musicians in the industry (Walters 2018). At the time, this was one of the only higher education institutions that offered a curriculum focused on film scoring.

Her first job on the path to becoming a film composer was as a music proofreader at Disney, a job that she got through connections at Dick Grove (Walters 2018). As a proofreader, she examined music for errors and places where the notation is unclear in order to facilitate rehearsals and recording time (Berklee College of Music 2018). This job led to opportunities in ghost writing (composing music for another person receives credit for the composition) and orchestration. As an orchestrator, the composer would give her a basic outline of a piece and she would arrange the piece for the orchestra to later record for the film (Walters 2018). Ritmanis received her first screen credit orchestrating under Shirley Walker (Walters 2018).

Shirley Walker began her career in film in 1979 when composer Carmine Coppola gave her the opportunity to play the synthesizer on the score for *Apocalypse Now*. She was the first female composer to earn a solo score credit on a major Hollywood motion picture in 1992 for her work on *John Carpenter's Memoirs of an Invisible Man* and was well known for her work on DC Comics' Animated television shows (CBS Interactive 2018). Despite receiving fewer opportunities because of her gender, Walker refused to be held back and continued to fight for recognition. In addition to composing, she conducted several orchestras for the recording of film scores in a time when there were few women in this job (Burlingame 2006). As a board member and vice president for the Society of Composers and Lyricists, Walker advocated for composers and their working conditions and was a pioneer for women in the film industry (CBS Interactive 2018). Walker took it upon herself to become a mentor to young composers, men and women alike, who hoped to one day have careers of their own. Many admired her ability to reach out to young composers and give genuine and helpful advice despite the competitive nature of the industry (Burlingame 2006).

When Walker announced that she was looking to mentor young composers, Ritmanis jumped at the opportunity. According to Ritmanis, Walker divided up the work amongst the composers and took time to mentor and give notes. Ritmanis stated that very few opportunities like this exist today. Each of the composers under Walker's mentorship got full credit and royalties for their work. This opportunity led to many others that allowed Ritmanis to become a composer

(Walters 2018). Walker's dedication to mentorship and to the craft set a precedent for all composers in the industry.

Ritmanis, along with Laura Karpman and Miriam Cutler, originally founded the Alliance for Women Film Composers to show respect for what Shirley Walker started by continuing to mentor young composers and pave the way for other women. As the organization grew, they took on the task of amplifying the work of and advocating for women composers in discussions with studios regarding who to hire, as well as educating emerging composers. As of September 2018, Ritmanis is the president of AWFC (Walters 2018).

Overshadowed by the Musical Canon

Historically, female composers have produced high quality works for as long as male composers. One is not inferior to the other, but common perception places men's work as superior to that of women (Macarthur 2017). The common understanding is that classical music canon came about as a result of a "rational, inevitable process that ensured the preservation of only the best works, those that stood the test of time" (Shreffler 2017, n.p.). According to German musicologist Carl Dalhaus, it is impossible to change canon because the "invisible hand² of tradition" created musical canon.

The reason that there has been little questioning of a musical canon consisting largely of all white, all male works is because of the widespread belief that music has no gender. The general public views famous composers not as men, or actual humans, but as prophets of music, existing beyond the concept of gender (Shreffler 2017). The same concept is not applied to women composers, as they are "women composers" rather than just "composers." Despite claiming to view music as genderless, scholars and audiences have actually been judging music on the basis of gender, favoring specific cultural ideologies of masculinity. Many who propose the inclusion of women composers and composers of color in curriculums, concert programs, or archives will face the argument that musical quality is more important than gender (Shreffler 2017).

Historically, Western women have not been in the same position of privilege as their male counterparts which would have allowed them to become composers. Most musically gifted women were denied the opportunity to the theoretical education that would have given them the skills necessary to become a composer. European conservatories only began to admit women into advanced theory and composition classes in the 1880's (Gates 1994). Before that, the only way that women would have access to musical instruction was if they were nuns, daughters of wealthy families, or born into a family of musicians that valued teaching both their sons and daughters musical skills. Additionally, the time of most women was spent on household responsibilities and child-rearing and many women did not have the financial independence necessary to have a career in composition (Gates 1994). As a result, few major symphony orchestras will include works by women composers in their programs. In fields such as music composition, philosophy, or orchestra conducting, where quality and achievement are difficult to measure and are subject to judgment of the composer's level of genius, men have historically surpassed women in these areas (Shreffler 2017). Today's women composers have proven to be just as capable as their male counterparts, so why do they continue to face the challenge of overcoming these historically and systematically constructed obstacles towards a successful career in composition?

² The phrase "invisible hand of tradition" parallels Adam Smith's invisible hand of capitalism. Those who believe in Smith's invisible hand view the workings of capitalism as natural and inevitable, when more realistically it perpetuates the interests of those in power (Shreffler 2017).

Obstacles in Higher Education

A person's gender, race, and socioeconomic status can have a significant influence their choice of a major in college, and therefore their career outcome. Students with a higher socioeconomic status will more often choose arts and science majors, perpetuating social inequalities (Goyette 2006). Men and women will choose majors with different rewards attached to them. For example, men will more often choose science and math majors because they lead to higher paying jobs that allow them to fulfill expectations of becoming a breadwinner (Goyette 2006). Within the field of music composition, fewer women will enroll in higher education courses that concentrate on composing for film, because these courses tend to be technology driven (Women in Academia Report 2017). Because of these societal and internal biases, fewer women pursue film composition as a major, and therefore, as a career.

Discrimination can also stem from within music departments. *The Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* conducted a study examining race and gender as factors in the evaluation of musical performances (Elliott 1996). Music students are often regularly required to perform for grades, for entry into certain groups, or to further their careers. The judges' evaluations of a musician's performance can have a significant impact on their academic and professional pursuits, so judges attempt to remain unbiased, fair, and objective. However, this study suggests that even more experienced judges can hold biases reflect in their evaluations. The experiment examined two different instruments: the flute, carrying a more feminine association, and the trumpet, carrying a more masculine association. A white man and woman and a black man and woman performed with each instrument (Elliott 1996).

The results of the study demonstrated that race was found to be the most significant factor with black individuals scoring significantly lower than their white counterparts. The women scored differently based on the instruments they played. When they played the flute, with a more feminine association, they scored higher than when playing the trumpet. In other words, they received higher scores for conforming to the expectations of how a woman should be a musician. The study demonstrates that stereotyping may influence the evaluations of musical performances, even with trained music educators. Additionally, the study found that a teacher's lowered expectation could hinder minority achievement, therefore creating a self-fulfilling prophecy in which minority students will see less success (Elliott 1996).

After choosing an arts major, the choice of major and a person's gender will have an impact on their career after higher education. Arts majors such as commercial art and graphic design, drama and theater arts, film, video, and photographic arts, fine arts, music, studio arts, and visual and performing arts make up 4.6% of all majors (Carnevale 2013). Of all art majors, 61% are women and 39% are men. The median earnings for those who receive a bachelor's degree for an arts major are \$44,000, but women with arts majors make approximately \$8,000 less than men (Carnevale 2013). Additionally, there is a large amount of variation from major to major. The highest earning major is fine arts with the lowest being studio arts, drama and theater, and visual and performing arts. Only about 23% of those who graduate with a bachelor's degree in arts go on to get a graduate degree and those who do will earn about 23% more than those without a graduate degree (Carnevale 2013). Of those who major in arts only 25% will actually go on to work as artists. Only about 8% of art majors will be consistently unemployed after graduating (Carnevale 2013). Despite the fact that higher numbers of women pursue arts in higher education, men tend to find more financial success in an arts career. With gender as a factor, women see even fewer incentives to pursue composition in an already competitive field. How can music programs in

higher education transform in order to facilitate and encourage women on the path to a career in composition?

A Career in Composition

Composing for film or television is a highly collaborative process. The creation of music starts with the composer working on a thematic idea for the main theme, which sets the tone for the film (Walters 2018). This process involves a lengthy back and forth, working with the producers, network, or studio regarding how they want the music to sound. The composer then has a spotting session, working from a cut of the film that has only dialogue (Walters 2018). In a spotting session, the creative team meets with the composer and takes as many notes as possible about the score. The composer then begins to write the music, with the help of the creative team. The composer has meetings with the producer and makes changes based on their feedback (Walters 2018). When the music is complete, they then finalize the music for delivery. If there is room in the budget for an orchestra, the creative team orchestrates the music for a recording session and deliver the music. If there is no room in the budget, they create the music with electronic instruments (Walters 2018).

Because the job is so collaborative in nature, one could assume that this job would be most suited for a woman. Allowing room for input, collaborating, and asking for advice from other colleagues is more common amongst women, specifically in comparison to male leaders. However, others tend to view women as indecisive when they are actually being collaborative (Huston 2016). Despite the nature of a job that would seem to play into women's strengths, women composers are treated as unequal to their male counterparts.

A Gender-Biased Industry

In 2017, Sally Macarthur conducted a study surveying several female composers in order to understand their gendered experiences. According to the participants of the study, most women composers believe their gender impacts the characteristics of their work and their career progression. The negative impacts include experiencing disadvantages because of their gender in a male-dominated field. Women composers often perceive that they receive fewer opportunities and fewer commissions. Unconscious gender biases persist even amongst men and women who attempt to have an egalitarian approach. Older women composers state they are often viewed as “dottering” rather than receiving the “distinguished” status held by their older male counterparts (Macarthur 2017, 83). Some cite facing bias from others who assume they are hired because of their gender. One woman in the study comments on her experience:

If a woman wants to try something she hasn't done before no one is going to trust her that she can do it. If she was a man, it would be way more likely someone would. If a woman is attractive most men think they have the right to flirt instead of discuss things (Macarthur 2017, 7).

Some women will experience sexual harassment from their male colleagues. Respondents cite incidents where men have flirted with them rather than taken them seriously as a conversation partner or when men have focused on their appearance rather than the quality of their music. This type of gender bias is often an unconscious part of these interactions (Macarthur 2017).

Many women struggle to have a healthy work-life balance, asserting that the career of a composer does not facilitate having and raising children. One participant noted that she decided

not to have children because of the demands of her career. Career responsibilities often conflict with effective networking, so many women were unable to develop full networks (Macarthur 2017). Many women feel awkwardness when successfully promoting themselves and suffer from a lack of confidence. Some experience a lack of support, with friends and family actively discouraging them from pursuing composition. Others notice intimidation from men in their field (Macarthur 2017). Women composers often face tokenism, being the only women working amongst men. Because they are often the only women, they additionally experience isolation and loneliness. As the industry is rife with harsh competition, women do not always find support between one another (Macarthur 2017).

Though Shirley Walker paved the way for women film composers, as well as creating a model for mentorship, her case was not the norm (Burlingame 2006). In general, women composers suffer from a lack of role models or mentors. Of the women in the Macarthur study, 53% had no women teachers, while 17% had between 1-10% women teachers (Macarthur 2017). They found that music composed by women was rarely represented in the classroom or in concerts, if it was represented at all. The women in these studies acknowledge that women composers largely emphasize professional encouragement from other women and attempt to create support networks in areas such as social media (Macarthur 2017). Women composers are concerned with supporting other women composers through mentorship, attending each other's performances, promoting each other on social media, and participating in women composers' festivals. Data suggests that, more than men, women composers have a preoccupation with women's representation in the field of music composition (Macarthur 2017). This places women in the predicament of fighting for their own representation. Organizations such as the AWFC formed in response to a male-dominated industry which would have remained otherwise undisturbed.

Composer and AWFC founder Miriam Cutler states that, "the financial stakes are very high. The players have a community they are comfortable with and have a track record with. It's a way of doing business that works for them. It's an elite community and frankly a bit of a boys' club — the same reasons we find a lack of diversity in other parts of this industry" (Burlingame 2016, n.p.). Despite their successes, many members of the classical music community still refuse to accept these women. As a result, higher numbers of women composers will work in community music settings or in schools than male composers (Macarthur 2017). Their creative work is presented in an amateur context and male composers continue to surpass women to achieve higher paid and more respected positions.

Out of 81 Oscar awards, women have been nominated only seven times in categories related to film scoring (Burlingame 2016). Only three have won: Rachel Portman for *Emma* (1996), Anne Dudley for *The Full Monty* (1997) both in the Best Original Score category, and Marilyn Bergman for *Yentyl* (1983) in the Original Song Score category (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences 2019). There are also low numbers of women in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. According to composer Laura Karpman, membership into the Academy "means you are part of the elite of the motion picture business. That is a tremendous boost on every level" (Burlingame 2016, n.p.). Membership connotes a certain level of credibility towards which women film composers strive.

In a survey of screen composers, 67% of the women composers agreed with the statement: "gender discrimination is common in the industry." Only 32% of male composers agreed, despite many male studio executives' assertions that they do not know of any women composers (Women in Academia Report 2017). The Women in Academia Report, a group that reports trends

concerning women in higher education and issues of gender discrimination, released a report suggesting that asking men in the industry to have a certain level of awareness may not be enough:

Asking men to at least think about how their practices and decision-making processes may be negatively impacting women, and to acknowledge that women's experiences of the industry may be very different to their own is a simple starting point, but one that needs to go much further. Other strategies such as finding ways for women to network and develop partnerships that help sustain their careers should be considered (Women in Academia Report 2017, n.p.).

The report offers certain goals that will help women composers to be treated more equitably in the film industry, such as finding ways to network and developing partnerships. However, it does not offer solutions as to how to reach these goals and overcome the obstacles that make these goals difficult in the first place.

The gender-based obstacles faced by women composers are reflected in other fields, such as STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Representation of women in STEM fields has much more literature than that of women in film composition, and many initiatives have been put in place to remedy this dilemma. Research suggests that a woman's level of self-confidence is directly related to her persistence in STEM fields, causing fewer women to reach higher levels of STEM education. The gender gap is even more prominent at the doctoral level. Just as in music where women suffer from a lack of role models, as faculty members at universities, higher percentages of women in STEM work as part-time employees and are more concentrated in less prestigious ranks and institutions (Chaudhuri 2011). In addition, many women find that maintaining a proper work-life balance of managing career and family is difficult in a STEM career. However, many women experience male scientists perceiving them to be less dedicated to their research if they do not neglect the rest of their life. Therefore, women often postpone having children until later in their career. According to one woman in the study, "There are no good female role-models - all women in my field who are successful have sacrificed having children or rising to the highest levels" (Chaudhuri 2011, 46).

Women in STEM and in the arts face similar challenges, but with more research done on the problem in STEM fields. Can composers in the field and in higher education solve the problem of representation using research done in STEM fields to generate higher numbers of women composers? Or should they take a different approach?

The Responsibility for Change

Women in Film founder Tichi Wilkerson Kassel believes that for women to become more represented in the industry, they must know their craft, know the business, have high professional standards, and work harder than men:

Women must continue to educate themselves, to get more strength and power, and continue to pursue their dreams. Women still have to work harder, be smarter; they cannot become complacent. They must be more clear and more direct. Women are not as easily forgiven their trespasses. We have less leeway for errors (Seger 1996, 263).

She also states that women must overcome the issue of taking rejection personally. Once women reach these positions of power, it is important to speak out about what they see around

them, though some women do not want to speak out for fear of putting their position at risk (Seger 1996). From her perspective, women should not challenge the system, but rather work from within to create change. Only then will women be taken as seriously and given as many opportunities in the film industry.

Where Kassel places the responsibility on women to change their standing in the industry, other perspectives call upon men in the industry to create necessary change. If the men in power make an effort to examine the structures that keep women from inhabiting these creative jobs, they could become more proactive about hiring women. On the other hand, Australian-Asian filmmaker Pauline Chan, asserts that men in charge wish to believe that there is nothing wrong with the way the industry currently functions, rather than address the greater issues at hand (Seger 1996). Women do not feel this same sense of responsibility, because they are not the ones in power and can therefore be "objective bystanders" (Seger 1996, 245). Chan states that a woman can look at the situation from the outside in a more objective way and come up with great ideas for how things can function more effectively and more equitably (Seger 1996).

Does Kassel's perspective offer a viable solution? Does she place the responsibility of changing the industry on women, or does she place blame on women for not acting enough like men to succeed? Should the responsibility to change fall to women when men are the ones that created an exclusionary system? Or are women and other minorities the only ones who can create effective change from their outsider perspectives?

The Alliance for Women Film Composers

In spite of their struggles, women composers fight to build communities in order to confront the gendered obstacles they face on a day-to-day basis. Ritmanis, Karpman, and Cutlers' AWFC describes itself as a "community of composers and colleagues who strive to support and celebrate the work of women composers through advocacy and education" (Karpman 2018, n.p.). They state that promoting visibility is a necessary factor in creating equality in the industry and bringing in a wider range of voices to film, television, video games, as well as other media projects (Karpman 2018). The official mission advocates for inclusion of women composers within industry events; to support filmmakers, game developers, and studios in inclusion of women composers; and to educate, mentor, inspire upcoming women composers (Karpman 2018).

The AWFC carries out this mission through several initiatives: They create a directory of women composers including both established and up-and-coming writers. The directory's purpose is to serve as a resource for those searching for composers as well as a documentation and "formal enumeration" of women who are actively in the scoring in the industry (Karpman 2018). The directory now lists almost 400 women (Walters 2018). The AWFC holds meetings and gatherings in large and small groups to address career development, networking, representation, and opportunities. These meetings support open discourse, community building, and engaging in a productive dialogue. The organization promotes and celebrates the work and achievements of women composers. The AWFC believes that a public acknowledgement of a large variety of women composers is beneficial for every woman composer. Additionally, the organization strives to have a visible presence at industry events, advocating for inclusion in performances, broadcasts, festivals, and awards. Beyond representation of women in the industry, the AWFC advocates for the inclusion of women composers in studies and research about women in media (Karpman 2018).

AWFC has worked to create a sense of community among individual composers. The alliance hopes that one day it will no longer need to exist. Sarah Nesson's documentary "Women Who Score" follows a concert of the same name sponsored by the Alliance for Women Film

Composers (Nesson 2017). In August 2016, the AWFC put on this concert to showcase a variety of different works varying from classical to jazz styles all composed by 20 top women composers, both experienced and up-and-coming (Nesson 2017). This concert is another example of how this organization is working to bring female composers together, to call attention to who they are and the work that they do, and to advocate for representation of women in the film composition community. Though the AWFC does not claim to be the sole solution to the problem of underrepresentation of women in the film industry, its community offers unprecedented support and opportunities to up-and-coming women film composers attempting to navigate the industry.

The Future for Women Composers

After the 2015 “Women Who Score” concert, Lolita Ritmantis noted the immediate effect of the concert. The positive feedback she received from executives demonstrated how the concert actively helped to bring awareness to underrepresented women composers (Nesson 2017). The concert has also aided in gaining them entry into the submission process to score large-scale projects. Ritmantis hopes that awareness will reach the general public, beyond even Hollywood gatekeepers (Nesson 2017). Germaine Franco, another composer, says that the studio heads must take notice in order for substantial change to occur. So far, they have found that this effort to work together to call awareness to their work is more effective than working as individuals (Nesson 2017).

In June 2016, after facing pressure to increase diversity, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences invited 12 women to the music branch bringing the number to 38 out of 293 members of the music branch, or 13% of composers, songwriters, and music editors (Burlingame 2016). In spring 2018, Lolita Ritmanis, Miriam Cutler, and Laura Karpman received a Broadcast Music Inc. Champion Award for supporting women film composers (Walters 2018). Later that year, the Academy invited a record number of new members into their ranks, of which 49% are women and 38% are people of color. This includes Laura Karpman, former AWFC President, who was elected first female governor of Academy's music branch, out-polling three male candidates (Burlingame 2016). If all the invitees choose to join, overall female membership would increase from 28% to 31%, while non-white participation would raise from 13% to 16% (Ritmanis 2018). On the progress being made towards women’s representation in the film industry, Laura Karpman says, “I feel like I’ve been twisting a screw that’s been rusted in for 25 years and it finally feels like it’s loose. Does that mean I’m going to get the screw out and the door’s finally going to open? No, but it’s loose, and it’s incredibly exciting” (Burlingame 2016, n.p.).

The AWFC is an example of a group of women coming together who, after facing the struggles of a male-dominated industry, strove to create an easier path for those to follow. With the help of their concert and documentary, they managed to get the attention of higher-ups in the industry and create opportunities through this visibility. By creating the AWFC, the founders took an active stance to combat the challenges women face as composers. In the future, women composers will have a resource to find role models and mentors as well as opportunities for networking and advancement. Though informal groups of female composers may have existed in the past, the AWFC carved out a space in the industry for women composers that continues to grow.

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