

It's Not All About Talent **– Conditions Matter the Most**

Barbora Vacková Gillies on Women Composers

When we think of Czech women composers, most people will think of Vítězslava Kaprálová. We know very little about other Czech composers, particularly those who were active during the era of state socialism (1948–1989). The position and experiences of female composers in socialist Czechoslovakia are the focus of Barbora Vacková Gillies's doctoral dissertation at the University of Huddersfield in West Yorkshire. Her research was made possible by a prestigious Scholarship in Contemporary Music Studies awarded to her by the university.

Your subject of study is the position and professional experiences of women composers in socialist Czechoslovakia. How did you come to explore this topic?

When I wrote my bachelor's and master's theses at the Institute of Musicology of the Faculty of Arts at Charles University, focusing on Geraldine Mucha and her role as a female composer, I reached a point where she moved from Great Britain to communist Czechoslovakia. At that moment, I realised I had little understanding of how things worked here at the time. I was unaware of how many other women composed music, whether this was considered commonplace, or how their peers responded to them. While I knew that Mucha was a member of the Union of Czechoslovak Composers, I had no idea whether her gender had caused any controversy or if she was viewed as an anomaly. Additionally, I was curious whether socialist Czechoslovakia harboured the same biases against women composers that have been documented in earlier historical periods. I concluded that before delving deeper into the study of particular composers, it was essential to understand the context in which they lived and the factors that influenced their careers.



What was the most significant surprise you encountered when you first began your research?

Initially, I thought I would not discover much - the history of Czechoslovak music in the second half of the 20th century, as I knew it from literature, concert life, and my academic studies, was an all-male club, which didn't seem to concern anyone. I anticipated that the archives would reveal a landscape where composition was predominantly male, with women completely absent, and where that situation was taken for granted - simply the way things were. This perception was indeed accurate for institutions like the Union of Czechoslovak Composers. However, the period press revealed an entirely different narrative, one that illuminated societal attitudes toward women and their capacity to compose music. These prevailing notions and the emotions tied to them were distinctly articulated. It was primarily women themselves who voiced their opinions on the matter, often with sharp criticism. They were acutely aware that the challenges they faced were solely a result of their gender, and they evaluated this reality with a critical lens. I had expected to explore why there was a reluctance to acknowledge or address the gender imbalance, but instead, I was overwhelmed by sources that vividly illustrated societal views on women in composition, as well as their own lived experience as exceptions in a predominantly male-dominated field.

You also noted, however – at least at the institutional level, such as with the Union of Composers – the prevailing “gender blindness”. As there was legislation guaranteeing gender equality was in place, there was a prevailing belief that equality had already been achieved. However, the experiences of women composers were different.

On one hand, there was the politics of employment, and women indeed entered the workforce en masse, beginning to work in fields that would have been unimaginable in the past. There was certainly some advancement in this regard. However, one of the challenges concerning the role of the artist is that it is not typically viewed as a profession that directly contributes to the socialist economy. The arts exemplify the argument, voiced by numerous authors, that women’s labour under socialism was primarily seen as work for the regime rather than a means of self-actualisation and fulfilment. This was particularly evident in artistic unions, which showed little demand for women’s artistic voices, their works, opinions, or even their mere participation in musical culture. Simultaneously, there existed the notion that women already possess all rights, so the low number of women in composition was interpreted as some kind of biological given. It was assumed that the doors were open, and women had the same opportunities as their male counterparts. The small percentage of women in the field – consistently in single digits throughout the state socialist era – was rarely discussed. It was believed that women either could not, did not want to, or were not capable of participating. The prevalence of all-male panels in concert programmes, festivals, and committees became a norm that no one ever thought to question.

However, as you have demonstrated, other identity categories also played a role and were discussed.

During the preparations for the celebrations of the Year of Czech Music, for instance, the organisers endeavoured to represent composers from various regions across Czechoslovakia, spanning different generations and stylistic realms. However, there was no monitoring of gender, resulting in the complete exclusion of women.

So, there was a deeply ingrained belief that participation was solely a matter of personal choice; if women wanted to, they could pursue it. However, what systemic obstacles did women face that made it impossible for them to enter the field of composition in greater numbers?

Obstacles existed at multiple levels. First, there was a long-standing belief that women lack the necessary qualifications for composition; that it is not a field in which they can naturally excel; that composition is a male domain. This is evident in concert reviews from the period, which frequently express astonishment at the fact that a piece written by a woman isn’t bad. One critic openly admitted that he attended a concert of women composers with the expectation that it would be terrible. As we know, such cultural prejudices have a profound impact on individuals’ lives and their perceptions of what they can achieve. Consequently, it was rare for a little girl to envision herself as a composer – a result of a confluence of specific circumstances. And when a girl did choose this path, she was immediately confronted with the notion that she was pursuing something unusual or strange as soon as she began her studies. Women composers recount experiences of ridicule and a lack of respect from both classmates and professors, often facing various inappropriate comments. In some cases, the reactions were not overtly hostile: for instance, Zoja Černovská shared that at the conservatory, people would come to observe her as a curiosity. Overcoming these

challenges and persevering in this field required immense inner strength, and not all women were willing to endure such trials.

There is also a chapter in the book that discusses obstacles in personal life.

All of the composers I interviewed discussed the differing roles of men and women within the family, particularly the expectations placed on women regarding housework. Childcare and household responsibilities were viewed as entirely female concerns, a perspective supported by broader research in gender studies. The most successful and active composers all noted that their households operated differently; traditional conventions were set aside, allowing them to focus on their music and pursue compositional careers. They did not have partners who returned home from work expecting them to have cleaned and cooked – instead, these partners actively participated in household duties and sought to support their wives in their endeavours. However, this arrangement was, of course, exceptional for that time.

Was composition, and perhaps the arts more generally, different from the activities of women in other professions within the socialist workforce?

Absolutely. In other professions, women entered structures that allowed them to attain various positions and advance within the hierarchy, and they could apply themselves to this activity within standard working hours. However, composing is typically not a nine-to-five job. Many composers only had the opportunity to create music after their regular employment, perhaps at the radio or in music education. Unfortunately, this was also the time when women were occupied with what in the context of Czech gender studies is called “the second shift” – household responsibilities, such as cooking and cleaning.

Composition often represented a third shift for many women, following their day jobs and responsibilities for children and household duties, which, in numerous cases, was physically impossible. While there were several composers, such as Ivana Loudová and Sylvie Bodorová, who have produced a significant body of work and achieved considerable success, this success cannot solely be attributed to their exceptional talent and skill. It was also due to the support they received in managing their families and homes – whether from partners, parents, or siblings. Today, there is often backlash when women express the need for better conditions to produce art, as film director Daria Kashcheeva did at last year’s Czech Lion Awards. However, when women in the past created art, it was not merely a matter of working without complaint; rather, they existed within circumstances that enabled them to do so, often without the burden of children, for example.

The choice, then, was between a professional life and a private life?

Sometimes, yes. Composer Jarmila Mazourová, for instance, knew that she did not want children; she enjoyed going to work and composing in her spare time, which would have been impossible with a child. This was not a consideration for male composers. Marta Jiráčková, for example, shared that when her male colleagues were composing, the entire family would walk around on tiptoes to avoid disturbing them. Women did not have such luxuries; they were often seen as the default caregivers. As a result, they faced this difficult choice, or they were fortunate – most productive



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composers viewed it this way; as good fortune – to have a supportive partner. They all considered this to be exceptional.

You mentioned respondents in your research, which is based on both archival material and oral history methods. Was it important for you to gain insight not only into the operations of institutions and the official discourse but also into the personal lives and everyday decisions of women composers?

I extensively utilised the composers' correspondence stored in archives, which revealed significant insights into various aspects of their daily lives, particularly in the case of deceased composers. This correspondence offered valuable perspectives on their daily operations, their thought processes, and their self-perceptions. For living composers, I was able to inquire about topics that are less documented – such as family relationships, practical challenges, time management for composing, and their personal experiences. Such information is typically absent from official institutional materials, which primarily contain lists of works and similar data, but lack details about the conditions under which these works were created.

What information could you extract from the official materials, such as those provided by the Union of Composers, if gender was not a topic of discussion? What questions did you pose regarding these materials?

First, I was simply compiling data to gain insight into the representation of women in the field. Over the course of those forty-odd years, I found that women comprised only about 3% of the total. Programmes for concerts and festivals, as well as lists of scores to be published, featured almost exclusively male composers. I sifted through countless archival materials that addressed all manner of issues – political, practical, organisational – but the absence of women was simply not on the Union's radar; it was not part of the conversation. Moreover, the organisation divided labour in the traditional manner: men held all the important positions while women took on supportive roles. The speakers at Union conferences were men, while women served as secretaries, cloakroom attendants, provided



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Elena Petrová

refreshments, and managed the lounges. The inventory committee consisted of fifteen women but was directed by a man. This pattern was ubiquitous. Even the language used excluded women, effectively erasing them as subjects. Official letters, even when addressed to women, began with the phrase “Esteemed comrade” (in the masculine form). Composers and students were discussed in the masculine case, and then someone might refer to “our boys,” indicating that no one really took any notice of women.

Listening to what you are saying, all this may seem unsurprising or even self-evident, particularly for someone who has experienced it firsthand. For the participants, this state of affairs was so normalised that they regarded it as the natural order of things. How challenging was it for you to make these mechanisms conscious?

As there is virtually no literature on the Union, I had no idea how it works. I initially believed that some women’s initiatives or committees existed and that the Union might have organised concerts featuring works by female composers. Perhaps a little naively, I thought I would find something like that in the materials – we were talking about state socialism and engineered emancipation, after all. When I discovered that nothing of the sort existed, my goal became to articulate this blindness. While this may seem obvious, it is crucial to define it; otherwise, we risk perpetuating the socialist narrative that that was “simply how it was”. Furthermore, a critical understanding and clear definition of the situation are essential for readers who did not experience it firsthand but wish to comprehend the context – whether they are younger generations or readers living in different regions.

What, then, was the difference between the situation in the West and that in Czechoslovakia, given that the engineered emancipation process did not alter these fundamental parameters?

I’d say the most significant factor is probably the absence of a grassroots female emancipation movement in this region, as well as a lack of civic society. Additionally, critical concepts that would enable women to better understand their circumstances, like “the patriarchy”, were not well established.

But at the same time, your work demonstrates that women composers realised that they were in a disadvantaged position.

One of the most surprising discoveries in my research was that during the 1950s and 1960s, there existed an active and highly interconnected network of women composers and their supporters. This community had its own agenda, aiming to challenge the prejudices against female composers. Several prominent figures formed part of this movement, including composer Sláva Vorlová and her partner Vladimír Hloch, pianist Ludmila Novotná, and members of the Minerva Society, which established, in 1890, the first girls' secondary school in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. There were heated debates, as various opinions emerged on how best to support composers. In fact, we could speak of a feminist movement – albeit on a small scale – but this was genuine activism. Concerts, discussions, and lectures took place, as these individuals believed that composition was the last bastion in a world where women were even venturing into space. They sought to have women recognised as normal composers, not as curiosities, enabling them to develop their careers without their gender hindering their progress. Music writer and educator Lenka Vojtíšková dedicated herself to historical research and public education to demonstrate that women had written music for centuries, and it was social circumstances that prevented them from making their mark on the compositional canon. In the 1970s and '80s, there was nothing comparable: women in composition operated as isolated entities, each striving to carve out a place in a male-dominated world, with little connection beyond incidental friendships. Nevertheless, I believe it is crucial to emphasise that the awareness of one's disadvantaged position and the efforts to address it are not merely a post-revolutionary Western import or an issue of "gender ideology" – rather, it is something that Czechoslovak women throughout history lived with; an experience they faced and sought to reconcile.

During the recent celebrations of the Year of Czech Music, Sláva Vorlová garnered significant attention with the release of a double CD featuring a selection from her song and piano repertoire. She is one of the few female composers whose archive is available at the Czech Museum of Music. Are the lack of available resources among the reasons we know so little about Czech women composers after 1945?

Of course, it is a significant advantage for researchers if an estate exists – especially if it has already been catalogued. However, for most of these composers, even basic research has not been conducted; only Jitka Snížková has a catalogue of works. Furthermore, the majority of the estates are privately owned. We also require recordings, but only very few are available, making it difficult to gain a comprehensive understanding of each composer's style and scope. My research addresses the broader social context and the position of women composers in general. Unfortunately, we lack even fundamental information about the lives and work of these composers. While there is a monograph on Vítězslava Kaprálová, none exist for women composers of the second half of the 20th century. Anna Šerých's planned monograph on Sláva Vorlová will be the first of its kind. Additionally, there is very little secondary literature available – only a few journal articles and a handful of bachelor's and master's theses that focus solely on a particular segment of the work of a single composer.

You wrote your doctorate on the role of female composers in socialist Czechoslovakia while you were in Great Britain. How does the perspective on this topic differ between the Western context and Czechia?

In Western musicology, the fact that women in the arts have historically faced unequal positions is now widely acknowledged and has become the subject of extensive literature. Society has reflected on this issue and is beginning to address it through various initiatives and support systems. In Czechia, it is essential for us to identify the systemic obstacles that hinder our understanding of the situation as well as the music of women composers. It is crucial to comprehend the challenges they faced, especially when their work addressed topics related to the female experience. However, we are still perceived by the West as something of a periphery, which makes it even more important for us to share our own stories. We have primary sources, linguistic capital, contextual knowledge, and historical literature, so we should strive to engage in the broader discourse on music history. We must not accept a situation where only outsiders narrate our experiences “behind” the Iron Curtain. My research, for example, demonstrates that gender issues are not merely an external concept that can be easily applied to our context. We have our own history of women’s rights movements and of female solidarity and support and it is fascinating.

This also pertains to the experiences of composers during the state socialist period more broadly. This aspect is also addressed in your work. What are the specifics of this situation?

Women did not compose solely as women; they were part of the same political landscape as male composers and had to navigate and negotiate within it. And it turns out that this remains a highly sensitive issue that many find difficult to discuss. This presents a challenge for researchers: to gain a clearer understanding of what it meant to create art under state socialism without resorting to schemas such as “us” versus “them” or “artists” versus “the regime.” Archival materials and personal narratives enable us to challenge these often black-and-white narratives. For example, the Union of Composers was not merely viewed as an oppressor; it also served as an institution that created opportunities. Regarding musical style, instead of the usual bogeyman of socialist realism, two respondents noted that during their studies, they faced considerable pressure from their teachers to adopt avant-garde compositional techniques and abandon tonality, a system they personally preferred.

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