

WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION TO CLASSICAL MUSIC AND THE CHALLENGES THEY FACED

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Abstract: Women's have made significant contributions to classical music throughout history, despite facing numerous challenges such as societal restrictions, limited access to education, and gender-based discrimination. The role of women in classical music has been often overlooked, and many of their works were attributed to male counterparts or lost to history. However, the contributions of women in the creation, performance, and education of classical music are undeniable.

Keywords: Classical Music, women, Women's Contribution to Music, Challenges, Musician

1.0 Introduction

Throughout the centuries, women composers and musicians have had to navigate a male-dominated field. Many faced obstacles such as societal expectations that confined them to roles within the home and limited opportunities for formal training. In the 18th and 19th centuries, when most classical music institutions were closed to women, their creative potential was often stifled, and they were rarely allowed to perform in public. However, despite these constraints, many women composers emerged and produced works that would later be recognized for their innovation and emotional depth. Women such as Clara Schumann, Fanny Mendelssohn, and Ethel Smyth created influential works, though often overshadowed by their male contemporaries.

Clara Schumann, for example, was a renowned pianist and composer of the Romantic era. She faced the challenge of balancing her career with her duties as a wife and mother. Despite the limitations of her time, Clara's compositions were highly regarded by fellow musicians, and she played a crucial role in the development of piano music during the 19th century. Similarly, Fanny Mendelssohn composed over 460 works, but due to her gender, her compositions were often attributed to her brother, Felix Mendelssohn, or ignored altogether. Both Clara and Fanny had to fight for recognition in an environment where male composers were more widely celebrated.

The lack of access to formal music education further hindered the opportunities for many women in classical music. While men were encouraged to study composition and performance in conservatories, women had limited access to such institutions. In many cases, women were expected to focus on domestic duties, and their musical pursuits were often seen as secondary. As a result, many women learned music informally, often from family members, and were forced to find alternative paths to becoming professional musicians or composers.

In the 20th century, women musicians began to gain more recognition, with composers such as Louise Farrenc, Germaine Tailleferre, and Joan Tower gaining prominence. However, they still faced obstacles in achieving the same level of recognition and opportunities as their male counterparts. Even today, women composers and musicians continue to be underrepresented in orchestral programming and in classical music's historical canon.

Despite these challenges, women's contributions to classical music remain an essential part of its legacy. Through perseverance and resilience, women composers and musicians have left a lasting impact on the development of classical music. Their works continue to be celebrated, and their stories are increasingly being recognized, shedding

light on the crucial role that women have played in shaping the musical landscape.

The contributions of women to classical music are often overshadowed by historical narratives that have primarily focused on their male counterparts. Despite their significant impact, women composers, performers, and educators have historically faced numerous challenges that hindered their recognition and success in the field of classical music. From the Baroque period through the Romantic era and into the modern age, the role of women in classical music has been a mixture of groundbreaking achievements and often painful exclusion. These obstacles were not only societal but also institutional, with women frequently denied access to formal music education, professional performance opportunities, and the recognition afforded to male musicians.

In many historical contexts, women were expected to adhere to conventional roles in society that confined them to the domestic sphere. Music, however, was seen as an acceptable pursuit for women of the upper classes, especially in terms of performance, but composing or conducting was still largely viewed as the domain of men. The cultural biases against women in the music world were exacerbated by the belief that women lacked the intellectual capacity to create complex works, thus dismissing them from opportunities for composition or leadership in orchestral settings. As a result, the achievements of women in classical music have often been relegated to the background, with many of their works remaining unpublished or misattributed.

However, despite these societal constraints, women still managed to make profound contributions to classical music. Some, like Clara Schumann and Fanny Mendelssohn, achieved notable recognition in their own time, though often under challenging circumstances. Others, such as the pioneering American composer Amy Beach and the French composer Lili Boulanger, carved out places for themselves in the music world by defying conventional gender norms and producing significant works that would leave lasting impressions on the classical music landscape. Additionally, the role of women in shaping music education, performance, and criticism has been crucial, with figures like Nadia Boulanger—who trained many leading 20th-century composers—creating a legacy that would influence future generations.

Women's contributions to classical music have often gone unacknowledged or undervalued, largely due to the gender biases and the social structures that restricted their professional advancement. The lack of access to formal education in music conservatories, societal pressure to prioritize domestic roles over artistic careers, and limited performance opportunities were just some of the barriers women faced in their pursuit of music. Furthermore, the works of women composers were frequently overshadowed by their male contemporaries, whose compositions were more likely to be performed and preserved for posterity. As a result, many female composers, whose works were groundbreaking and innovative, fell into obscurity.

In recent years, however, there has been a growing recognition of women's contributions to classical music, as scholars, musicians, and historians work to revive forgotten works, uncover hidden histories, and challenge the traditional narratives that have shaped the understanding of classical music. This rediscovery of women's achievements is not only an important step in correcting historical imbalances but also an opportunity to better appreciate the rich diversity and complexity of classical music as a whole.

2.0 Historical Contributions of Women in Classical Music

Women have been involved in classical music since ancient times. References in scriptures, inscriptions, and literary works highlight their participation:

2.1 Vedic Period (1500 BCE – 500 BCE): Women in this period were known for their musical knowledge. Some female sages (Rishikas) such as Lopamudra and Gargi were not only well-versed in philosophy but also in music. Women chanted Vedic hymns, though later, societal restrictions limited their participation.

2.2 Medieval Period (6th – 18th Century): This era saw women playing a significant role in classical music, especially in temple singing (Bhakti Sangeet). Prominent figures include:

- Meera Bai – A saint-poet who composed and sang devotional songs dedicated to Lord Krishna.
- Bahinabai – A devotee of Lord Vithoba, known for her abhangs (devotional songs).
- Tansen's Daughter Saraswati* – She was known to have inherited the musical genius of her father, the legendary Tansen.
- Tawaifs and Courtesans – Many female musicians, such as Gauhar Jaan and Jaddan Bai, flourished in royal courts, though they were often stigmatized by society.

2.3 Modern and Contemporary Period (19th Century Onwards): The late 19th and 20th centuries saw women breaking barriers and becoming renowned classical musicians. Some notable names include:

- M.S. Subbulakshmi – The first woman musician to receive the Bharat Ratna. Her soulful Carnatic renditions made her an icon.
- Kesarbai Kerkar – A celebrated Hindustani classical vocalist from the Jaipur-Atrauli gharana.
- Gangubai Hangal – A doyenne of Hindustani classical music, known for her powerful voice.
- Girija Devi – A leading exponent of the Thumri genre.

3.0 Women's Contribution to Classical Music and the Challenges

Women in Indian classical music have made significant contributions over the centuries, but their journey has been fraught with numerous challenges rooted in social, cultural, and institutional barriers. These obstacles have ranged from limited access to formal music education and training, to societal restrictions on their performance and composition. Despite these difficulties, many women have successfully navigated these challenges, creating masterpieces and shaping the landscape of Indian classical music. However, the constraints placed on them have often led to the marginalization of their contributions. In this essay, we will explore the key challenges that women in Indian classical music have faced, referencing historical contexts, societal expectations, and the structures within the classical music world.

3.1 Cultural and Societal Norms

Historically, in Indian society, women were often relegated to the private, domestic sphere, with expectations that they would focus on managing household duties and raising children. The performing arts, including music, were generally considered to be male domains. This was especially true in the case of classical music, which was often viewed as an intellectual pursuit and a form of public performance that was perceived as unsuitable for women. In a society deeply rooted in patriarchal norms, the idea of a woman performing publicly was considered improper, and women who pursued careers in music often faced social stigma.

Even though there were notable women musicians and singers, they were often confined to certain forms of music, particularly those related to devotional or folk traditions, which were seen as more "appropriate" for women. Women were often expected to perform in private or domestic settings rather than on public stages. This cultural restriction on women's participation in public performance lasted for many centuries and continues to have a lingering effect in some parts of Indian society today.

3.2 Limited Access to Formal Education

Another significant challenge faced by women in Indian classical music has been limited access to formal music education. Historically, music in India was passed down through oral traditions, with men often being the primary recipients of formal training from renowned gurus. Women were often excluded from these traditional educational avenues and were less likely to be invited to study with prestigious gurus. Classical music institutions and the gurukul system, which was the primary method of imparting music knowledge, were typically male-dominated spaces.

In the early 20th century, as Indian classical music began to become more institutionalized with the establishment of music schools and colleges, women still faced challenges gaining access to formal education. Many women musicians had to learn music informally or under the tutelage of family members or in domestic settings, which did not provide the same structured training as men received. Notable women such as Vishnupriya, a celebrated dhrupad singer, were often limited by the lack of institutional support, and their contributions to the classical tradition were frequently overlooked due to their limited educational opportunities.

Despite these challenges, some women managed to access education and training, albeit through non-traditional methods. For instance, the legendary vocalist Begum Akhtar studied classical music informally under various gurus, but this was not the norm for most women during her time.

3.3 Gender Bias and Discrimination in Performance

The gender bias in Indian classical music has had a profound impact on women's ability to perform in public and be recognized as serious artists. While male musicians were given access to concert stages and the spotlight, women were often confined to smaller, more intimate performances or devotional settings. Even when women gained recognition for their musical prowess, they were frequently expected to conform to specific gender norms that limited their artistic expression.

For instance, in the early 20th century, women performers were expected to maintain a certain degree of modesty and were often relegated to vocal or instrumental music that was perceived as "gentler" or "softer." Women were also subject to the belief that they should not display too much virtuosity or emotion in their performances, as doing so was considered inappropriate. This bias not only hindered women from achieving their full potential but also limited the diversity and innovation that women could bring to classical music.

This gendered perception of music extended into the very institutions that governed Indian classical music. Prestigious organizations, such as the All India Radio and major music festivals, were slow to provide women performers with the same opportunities as their male counterparts. As a result, many women in classical music had to fight harder to earn their place in the public eye and be recognized as equal artists.

3.4 Social Stigma and Family Pressure

Many women in Indian classical music faced societal and familial pressures that restricted their ability to pursue music as a professional career. While women were encouraged to learn music as a domestic skill, it was not always viewed as an acceptable career path. Family members, particularly male relatives, were often skeptical of women pursuing music professionally, as it went against traditional gender norms.

One of the key reasons for this resistance was the belief that women's roles should be centered around the home and family rather than public endeavors such as music. Music, particularly classical music, was often seen as an indulgence for women, and they were discouraged from pursuing it as a livelihood. As a result, many talented women in classical music had to defy their families' expectations, taking on the additional burden of asserting their right to perform and compose.

Moreover, the social stigma surrounding women's public performance led to the notion of women performers being "entertainers" rather than serious musicians. This stigma was particularly prevalent in the case of women musicians who performed for royal courts or public gatherings, where they were often associated with courtesanship or other socially marginalized roles. This association further undermined their standing as serious artists and led to the lack of respect for their contributions to the classical music tradition.

3.5 Underrepresentation and Marginalization

The contributions of women to Indian classical music have often been marginalized, with their work being undervalued in comparison to that of their male counterparts. Historically, the canon of classical music has been shaped by male musicians, composers, and critics, with very little attention given to the works of women. Many

women composers and performers have had to fight for recognition in a music world that has been dominated by male figures, and their works have often been neglected or erased from historical accounts.

Even today, there is a significant underrepresentation of women in the classical music canon. The programming of major music festivals, concert performances, and radio broadcasts often favors male composers and performers, with female artists receiving limited visibility. This lack of recognition has contributed to the continued marginalization of women's contributions to classical music.

In some instances, women's music was recorded or transcribed by male musicians or scholars, who took credit for their work or altered it to fit their own interpretations. This further obscured the role of women in shaping Indian classical music and perpetuated the idea that women were not capable of producing significant contributions to the art form.

3.6 The Gendered Division of Music Genres

In Indian classical music, there has been a longstanding gendered division of genres, with certain types of music being considered "appropriate" for women and others reserved for men. For instance, vocal music, particularly khayal and thumri, was often seen as a genre suited to women, while dhrupad and instrumental music were typically considered male domains. This division limited women's ability to engage with and innovate within different musical genres.

This gendered division was particularly evident in the world of classical instrumental music. Women have been historically underrepresented in the world of sitar, sarod, and other instrumental music. Instruments such as the veena and the tabla were typically seen as more "feminine" and therefore more accessible to women. However, the lack of access to the more prestigious and challenging instruments further hindered women's involvement in shaping the classical music tradition.

4.0 Women's Triumph Over Challenges

Despite the numerous challenges, many women overcame barriers and revolutionized the field of classical music. Several key developments helped in their progress:

1. **Establishment of Music Academies:** Women started gaining access to formal education in music through institutions like Gandharva Mahavidyalaya, Bhatkhande Music Institute, and Kalakshetra.
2. **Inclusion in Radio and Television:** The introduction of All India Radio (AIR) provided a significant platform for women musicians, enabling them to reach wider audiences.
3. **Social Reforms and Changing Mindsets:** The gradual shift in societal attitudes, along with the feminist movement, helped women gain greater acceptance in the field of classical music.
4. **Government Awards and Recognition:** Prestigious honors like Padma Awards, Bharat Ratna, and Sangeet Natak Academy Awards have been given to several female classical musicians, acknowledging their contributions.

5.0 Conclusion

The challenges faced by women in Indian classical music have been deeply entrenched in societal, cultural, and institutional biases that have historically undermined their contributions. From societal expectations and limited access to education, to gender bias in performance opportunities and underrepresentation in the music canon, women have had to confront numerous barriers in their pursuit of musical excellence. Despite these challenges, many women have persevered, defied societal norms, and left a lasting impact on Indian classical music. As we continue to celebrate and recognize their achievements, it is crucial to address these historical injustices and ensure that women in classical music are given the recognition and opportunities they rightfully deserve.

6.0 References

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