



Anne-Marie O'Farrell, one of many women composers in Ireland with a substantial output across a range of forces, but no woman features in the core listening works for the Leaving Cert. exam.

Sexism and the Leaving Cert. Music Syllabus

The representation of women in the Leaving Certificate music syllabus is practically non-existent, writes Laura Watson, and revision is long overdue.

- [Laura Watson](#)

A UK school student has launched a petition campaigning for women to be included on an A-level music syllabus. That syllabus, which features sixty-three set works spanning several centuries and genres, fails to include a single piece by a woman. Jessy McCabe, the seventeen-year-old behind the campaign, writes: 'How can we expect girls to aspire to be composers and musicians if they don't have the opportunity to learn of any role models?'

Disappointingly, the situation in Ireland mirrors that lamented by McCabe. Core to the 'Listening' strand of the Leaving Certificate music syllabus is a group of four set works. Two groups alternate every few years: the first comprises works by J.S. Bach, Tchaikovsky, Gerald Barry and the rock band Queen; the second consists of music by Mozart, Berlioz, Raymond Deane and the Beatles. No woman features in this roll-call of musicians – not from the centuries-long classical tradition, nor the current Irish scene, nor the world of twentieth-century popular music. In the other elements of the 'Listening' strand – Irish traditional music and aural skills – women fare slightly better on the traditional side, where the suggested recording artists include Máire Breatnach, Siobhán Breatnach, Sharon Shannon, Altan and Clannad. However, there are only two female-authored songs (by Enya and María Grever) buried in the six pages of classical, traditional and popular material recommended to develop students' aural skills.

Why should we be troubled by this? And what can educators do to make amends?

One of the main faults of the senior-cycle music syllabus is that it distorts the truth of Western music history – its silencing of women's compositional voices is intellectually dishonest. Since the explosion of feminist musicology in the 1980s, researchers have rediscovered and documented the extensive past of women's vital contributions to the evolution of Western music. The names of Hildegard of Bingen, Francesca Caccini, Fanny Mendelssohn, Nadia Boulanger, Ethel Smyth, Florence Price and Rebecca Clarke might not be familiar to casual listeners, but scholarship on these and other women

has flourished for over thirty years. *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150 – 1950* appeared as long ago as 1987. Given the wealth of resources now devoted to women in music – not to mention their assimilation into mainstream anthologies such as the *Norton Anthology of Western Music* – there is no justification for their continued exclusion from the curriculum.

The sexist bias inherent in the Leaving Certificate music-history narrative extends into its exploration of contemporary Irish music. Whatever about the situation in the mid-1990s when the syllabus was designed, is it right today that Barry and Deane alone are the sole representatives of the national scene? Considering the profile and output of Irish female composers such as Jane O’Leary, Gráinne Mulvey, Jennifer Walshe, Elaine Agnew, Eibhlís Farrell, Linda Buckley, Anne-Marie O’Farrell, Siobhán Cleary, Deirdre Gribbin, Janet Harbison, Judith Ring, Ailís Ní Ráin, Karen Power, Marian Ingoldsby, Rachel Holstead, Rhona Clarke and more, the answer is surely no.

Real recognition

The gendered misrepresentation of Irish composers seems especially egregious in light of how female candidates consistently outnumber males by a factor of two to one in Leaving Certificate music. Strangely, given the gender blind-spots evident in the choice of set works, the current syllabus was redesigned in the mid-1990s with one eye on rectifying concerns about the [‘low participation rates of male students’](#). Regardless of these intentions, music remains a subject predominantly studied by female students, who deserve better than the wholesale, wholly inaccurate erasure of their sex. In reality, there is no shortage of creative female role-models for students, but students are unlikely to discover these composers without the explicit will to ensure their presence on the syllabus.

Let me be clear: what I’m calling for is not tokenistic reference to the occasional female composer but real recognition of women’s participation in the select musical traditions emphasised in the Leaving Certificate. It is absurd that the only woman even peripherally associated with the current core ‘Listening’ strand is Harriet Smithson, the Irish actress who inspired Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique*. Perhaps unwittingly, opting for this Berlioz score reinforces the patriarchal notion that the only role women played in classical music was that of muse for male creative geniuses.

While there might be a compelling argument for illustrating eighteenth-century styles, forms and genres via Bach and Mozart, is there any real rationale for the all-male representation of the later musical developments? Teachers could evoke the nineteenth-century Romantic cult of artistic struggle by introducing students to Fanny Mendelssohn, who composed prolifically despite serious self-doubt and her brother Felix’s paternalistic opposition to the publication of her music. Equally, there is much material in what Nancy B. Reich describes as the ‘musical triumph and personal tragedy’ of Clara Schumann’s life and career as a virtuoso pianist and composer. Yet another option would be to explore Romantic programme music through Augusta Holmès’s symphonic poem *Irlande* (1882). And as the syllabus seems intent on conflating twentieth-century composition with Ireland, why not alternate Deane and Barry with figures such as Agnew and Mulvey? Meanwhile, an international view of twentieth-century and contemporary music could encompass the works of Elizabeth Maconchy, Ruth Crawford Seeger, Pauline Oliveros, Sofia Gubaidulina and more.

Worst of all is the omission of women from the popular-music set works. After all, the blues, which laid the foundations for a wealth of post-1950 pop and rock genres, were first recorded by women. In 1920 Mamie Smith scored a huge hit with ‘Crazy Blues’, which paved the way for Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey and other black female singers to build their careers. The blues these women recorded were often self-penned and spoke of their own experiences. In those respects, their music epitomises the raw vocal power, authentic lyrical expression and complexity later prized by arbiters of the rock canon. That aforementioned characteristic of complexity undoubtedly motivated the appearance of ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ and ‘Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band’ on the syllabus. Yet these same qualities also define the output of Joni Mitchell, Nina Simone, Patti Smith and Kate Bush, to name just a few women who should have been on the radar for this syllabus in the 1990s.

Further revision of the ‘Listening’ strand of the Leaving Certificate music syllabus is long overdue. Its white, male paradigm of Western art music – and even popular music! – suffers from a troubling lack of gender and race diversity that must be addressed. Perhaps the more progressive policies informing the present Leaving Certificate English course could serve as a blueprint. Applying to music the view that [‘language is not a neutral medium of expression and communication. It is embedded in history, culture, society...’](#) would be a good start.

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