

Singing a Different Tune:

Re-sounding Intersectional
Voices in Classical Music

ABSTRACT

This article explores the intersectional exclusion of women composers in Western classical music. While feminist musicology has long challenged this exclusion, many approaches remain constrained by additive frameworks that do not sufficiently interrogate the institutional and aesthetic structures through which exclusion is continually reproduced. We integrate intersectional feminist theory with Karen Barad's concept of material-discursive entanglements to move beyond fixed identity categories, demonstrating how marginalisation emerges through entangled systems of power, institutional practice, and sonic hierarchy. In response to the dominance of text-based academic knowledge, we develop a diffractive, multisensory methodology that invites readers to listen as they read, foregrounding the affective, embodied, and sensory dimensions of musical exclusion. This materialises a feminist epistemic intervention that re-sounds intersectional voices within and through classical music, while also reconfiguring how exclusion is understood, felt, and resisted. In doing so, we contribute to feminist musicology and intersectional studies by offering a method for both analysing and unsettling exclusionary norms, with implications for institutions, pedagogies, and practices of cultural legitimacy.

KEY WORDS

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INTRODUCTION

Often idealised as universal and apolitical (Fisher, 2013), classical music – like jazz (Annfelt, 2003) – obscures deeply entrenched structures of exclusion. The Western classical canon remains shaped by practices that systematically exclude women composers at the intersections of race, class, and geography (Ritchey, 2019). These exclusions are not simply a matter of oversight: women composers face barriers to entry, limited training, restricted opportunities for publication and performance, and persistent lack of professional recognition (Dowd & Park, 2023), ensuring their exclusion from multiple forms of representation throughout musical careers. [1] Responding to this inequality, we examine how the intersectional exclusion of women composers in Western classical music operates not as a historical absence but as a structural presence, maintained through colonial, patriarchal, and neoliberal forces embedded in the music's very institutions and practices. For classical music to *sing a different tune*, it must confront the exclusions woven into its sonic and institutional foundations.

Feminist critiques have long highlighted gendered exclusion in musicology (Bennett, 2018), yet many analyses focus on gender in isolation, neglecting the compounded oppressions experienced by women of colour and working-class women (Werner & Kuusi, 2023). Further, feminist scholars have also problematised “gender” itself, arguing exclusion is not merely underrepresentation but about how gender is constructed and maintained through musical discourse, institutional policy, and performance norms (Werner et al., 2021). In response, scholars have taken diverse approaches: some have traced parallel histories of women's music (McClary, 1991), others have worked within existing disciplinary frameworks (Fowler, 2006/07), while more fluid approaches (Weir, 2013) have been critiqued for privileging individualism over collective solidarity (Braidotti, 2006). Building on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), we extend this scholarship by integrating Karen Barad's theory of material-discursive entanglements (2007),

emphasising embodied and affective knowledge while resisting essentialist constructions of gender.

This article contributes to feminist musicology by explicitly bridging intersectionality and feminist new materialism, moving beyond additive frameworks. Rather than treating exclusion as a historical oversight, we show how it is actively sustained through the entanglement of sonic, institutional, and discursive processes. While intersectionality has exposed compounded oppression, it has also been critiqued for treating identity as fixed (Puar, 2012). By incorporating feminist new materialism (Barad, 2007), we foreground intra-action and co-emergence, reframing music and listening as dynamic, affective, and materially situated (Eidsheim, 2015). In doing so, we learn from, and with, broader concerns in organization studies around power, embodiment, and the more-than-human, offering a framework for understanding how exclusions are not only represented but materially enacted across institutional domains.

Our interdisciplinary approach foregrounds a reciprocal exchange between feminist musicology and organization studies, where each field brings distinct yet resonant concerns – around power, embodiment, and materiality – that deepen the other. While feminist musicology offers textured insights into the affective and sonic dimensions of institutional life, organization studies contributes frameworks for understanding systemic exclusion, gendered labour, and the structuring of professional practice. Together, they open space for rethinking how exclusions are materially enacted, and how listening, voice, and the more-than-human shape institutional possibility.

Rather than using marginalised composers as illustrative examples, we position music itself as agential – actively shaping understandings of inclusion and exclusion. By integrating sound into the work of knowledge production, we challenge the dominance of text-based research paradigms and respond to calls for more innovative, affective, and impactful scholarship (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2023; Harding & Ford, 2025). Although musicologists often frame music

as cultural text embedded in social and historical discourse (Kramer, 1995), this framing still centres interpretation that is tethered to text. Our approach moves beyond this by attuning to the material and affective force of sound – not as supplement to meaning, but as co-constitutor of knowledge. In doing so, we extend feminist and new materialist critiques by treating the sonic as representational, agential, and political.

Our work resonates with calls for multimodal methodologies that disrupt conventional research formats and expand engagement with inclusion and representation in the creative industries. Through a multisensory format (Bozalek, 2022; Mitchell et al., 2024) that integrates text and sound, we expose exclusionary structures in classical music while re-sounding embodied and affective encounters with intersectionality. Embedding listening links within the text disrupts disembodied modes of knowledge production. Adopting a diffractive approach, we treat our analytic practice not only as interpretative but as an epistemic intervention – one that reconfigures how exclusion is experienced, understood, and potentially undone.

ENTANGLEMENTS AND EXCLUSIONS

Through a diffractive engagement with feminist musicology, intersectionality, and feminist new materialism, we now trace how these frameworks interact, entangling with and reconfiguring one another to expose the material-discursive forces shaping exclusion in music. Rather than treating these perspectives as discrete or additive, we explore their entanglements to critically examine the structural, aesthetic, and affective mechanisms that sustain women's exclusion within Western classical music. This moves beyond merely identifying exclusions to analysing how they are dynamically enacted through intra-active material-discursive processes, reframing exclusion as an ongoing structuring force.

EXCLUSION FROM THE CANON AND FEMINIST MUSICOLOGY

Feminist musicology has extensively critiqued the

exclusionary mechanisms at work in the classical canon, highlighting how the idea of “musical genius” has historically been gendered as masculine, marginalising women composers (Citron, 1993; McClary, 1991). The exclusionary mechanisms are deeply rooted in informal social networks and homosocial spaces that favour men (Bayton, 1997; Goldin & Rouse, 2000). These informal structures extend to the technical and gatekeeping roles that men dominate, particularly in music production and sound engineering (Born & Devine, 2015). These informal exclusions create significant barriers for women, especially those engaging with the technical aspects of music.

Neoliberal ideologies further entrench these exclusions (Dungy & Krings, 2024) by endorsing tokenistic narratives of women who “have it all” (Shim, 2021; Wilkes, 2015). The selective celebration of exceptional cases does not dismantle systemic inequities (Scharff, 2017); rather, reflecting broader shifts in the cultural industries, where success is determined not by artistic merit alone but by alignment with dominant values of profitability, prestige, and marketability (León, 2014; Sanders et al., 2022). Assumptions that music inherently dissolves social inequalities are critiqued by Gadir (2016) and Morrison (2019), who reveal ongoing gendered, racialised, and class-based biases within both mainstream and alternative music spaces. Also, radical feminist approaches have sought to create a parallel history of women's music, inserting the names of women composers into the existing male-dominated canon (Hisama, 2002; McClary, 1991; Rieger, 1992).

However, feminist strategies that insert women composers into the canon, though important for recovery, risk reinforcing the very hierarchies they seek to challenge. Liberal feminist approaches, which emphasise visibility within existing structures (Adkins Chiti, 2003; Macarthur, 2010) often align with neoliberal frameworks that valorise individual success over structural transformation. Neoliberal ideologies further entrench exclusion by endorsing tokenistic narratives of women, masking the persistence of

structural inequities.

However, women composers have also often operated within the same patriarchal and neoliberal structures that maintain their marginalisation, rather than challenging the deeper power dynamics that shape exclusion in classical music. Also, while feminist musicology has been instrumental in surfacing historical exclusions, it has often focused on supplementing existing narratives rather than integrating a critical interrogation of the structures that continually reproduce exclusion. Feminist new materialism problematises the very notion of “addition,” emphasising how exclusions emerge dynamically through entanglements of material conditions, institutional practices, and sonic hierarchies. This perspective aligns with critiques of neoliberal postfeminist frameworks, which emphasise individual success at the risk of undermining collective solidarity (Braidotti, 2006; Dines & Smith, 2012; Weir, 2013).

THINKING INTERSECTIONALLY AND INTRA-ACTIVELY

To address the systematic exclusion of marginalised voices in Western classical music, we must move beyond gender to account for how race, class, and geography intra-act to shape these exclusions. Intersectionality theory allows us to identify compounded marginalisation along race, gender, and class axes (Bull, 2019; Crenshaw, 1991; Werner & Kuusi, 2023). Yet, exclusion operates not only through identity-based barriers but also through institutional and economic structures – such as access to elite conservatoires, technological resources, and professional networks (Werner & Kuusi, 2023). Recognising these material-discursive conditions shifts the focus beyond identity markers to the structural and institutional mechanisms that actively sustain exclusion in classical music.

However, as Puar (2012) critiques, intersectionality has often relied on static identity categories, treating exclusions as pre-existing structures rather than seeing them as emergent through ongoing social,

cultural, and material processes. Feminist new materialism (Barad, 2007) pushes intersectionality further by highlighting how identities and exclusions emerge intra-actively, through ongoing institutional practices, compositional norms, and embodied interactions. The exclusion of Florence Price is often framed intersectionally as a static convergence of racial and gender bias (Brown, 2020; Scharff, 2017; VanderHart & Gower, 2021). A feminist new materialist perspective instead understands Price’s marginalisation as an ongoing process, enacted through archival practices, publishing silences, and aesthetic hierarchies that shape her reception in the present. Even when composers of colour are included on concert programmes, it is often tokenistic, reaffirming the dominance of white, patriarchal aesthetics rather than challenging them.

Recent scholarship in organization studies has begun to take seriously the affective, aesthetic, and embodied dimensions of organizational life (e.g., Bell & Vachhani, 2020; Harding & Ford, 2025). These conversations resonate with feminist musicology’s attention to sound, voice, and the sensory, opening possibilities for post-disciplinary thinking around how institutions materialise exclusion and belonging. Our work brings these insights into dialogue, treating sonic and organizational forms not as parallel concerns but as mutually entangled processes through which gendered exclusions are produced, maintained, and potentially reconfigured.

Building on intersectionality theory, feminist new materialism (Barad, 2007) challenges the fixity of identity categories, reframing exclusion not as a pre-existing condition but as an emergent, intra-active process continually shaped through entanglements. In Western classical music, this supposes entanglements between composers, listeners, institutions, and sonic material itself. Feminist new materialism reconceptualises marginalisation as a dynamic process, where archival silences, institutional norms, and performance hierarchies continuously shape who is heard and who remains absent (Macarthur, 2014; Morrison, 2019). Barad’s conception of intra-action

(2007) offers further insight into how social identities like gender, race, and class are not static categories that intersect but are dynamically produced through their relationships with social, cultural, and material structures (Anthias, 2001; Holvino, 2010; Ridgeway & Kricheli-Katz, 2013). Barad emphasises that entities do not exist independently before their interactions but emerge through the ongoing dynamics of these entanglements. This notion is particularly valuable for musicology, where exclusion is not an event of the past but a continuously enacted process that determines whose work gains legitimacy and whose is silenced.

While intersectionality maps exclusion along identity categories (e.g., gender, race, class), feminist new materialism reconceptualises exclusion as an emergent phenomenon shaped by the entanglement of composers, listeners, institutions, and sonic material. This shift is particularly important for feminist musicology, where exclusion is often framed as a historical oversight rather than a process actively shaping contemporary musical practices. Viewing exclusion through intra-action reveals that historical omissions are not merely remnants of past discrimination but are actively sustained as performative acts, continuously reinforced through archival absences, institutional performance norms, and aesthetic hierarchies. For example, the limited availability of recordings and published works by marginalised composers does not simply reflect past discrimination, it actively determines their present-day recognition and legitimacy, demonstrating how exclusion is reproduced through material-discursive forces rather than existing as a fixed historical event.

TOWARDS EMBODIED AND SENSORY INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSES

Moreover, both intersectional and feminist new materialist thought critique the intellectual privileging of text-based academic knowledge. Notably, feminist new materialism calls for an embodied, sensory approach that disrupts the hierarchical separations between thought and feeling, subject and

object (Ahmed, 2013; Marks, 2000). Such sensory, embodied, and affective approaches hold potential for different modes of knowledge creation via 'sensible ruptures' (Acharya & Musasya, 2023). The prevailing dualism that privileges the intellectual (often coded as masculine) over the emotional and embodied (often coded as feminine) has historically reinforced the exclusion of women from classical music and, by extension, anyone who does not conform to the norms of cis-masculine dominance. This is not simply a matter of representation, but of epistemological bias, where dominant knowledge systems fail to account for the affective, material, and sensory dimensions of music. The dominance of text-based scholarship in musicology has historically reinforced disembodied forms of knowledge production, marginalizing the sensory and affective dimensions of music (Born & Devine, 2015). However, feminist scholars argue that engaging with sound as a material-discursive phenomenon challenges these exclusions by re-centring embodied experience in musical analysis (Werner et al., 2021).

In musicology, Smith et al. (2020) highlight the underrepresentation of women, noting that quantitative studies often focus on gender disparities without addressing the structural, aesthetic, and sensory barriers that underlie them. Similarly, Macarthur (2014) critiques those approaches that quantify representation but fail to challenge the aesthetic standards that marginalise women's contributions. This reinforces the argument that reducing feminist analysis to gender alone overlooks the embodied and emotional dimensions central to understanding exclusion. Neoliberal frameworks further entrench these exclusions by commodifying music, erasing its emotional and social potential (Macarthur, 2014). In contrast, sensory methodologies recognise music's material agency and its ability to disrupt hegemonic norms in academic knowledge production. This perspective emphasises that music itself is not just an object of study but an active participant in shaping knowledge, experience, and exclusion.

In this research, we enact diffraction, materialising

the entanglement of intersectionality and feminist new materialism. Just as sonic exclusions are produced through institutional practices, they can be disrupted through embodied engagements with music itself, challenging the epistemological dominance of text. Through its material-discursive entanglements, music is not merely a passive reflection of exclusion but an active force in its production – its performance, recording, and archival status directly shaping whose voices are heard and whose remain silent (Ahmed, 2013; Barad, 2007; Degórski, 2022). This methodological innovation not only enacts the theoretical entanglements of intersectionality and feminist new materialism but also resists the disembodied epistemologies that have historically marginalised embodied, sensory ways of knowing.

Barad's concept of agential realism (2007) further underscores that music, as a material-discursive entity, possesses agency in shaping knowledge. This perspective is evident in feminist art and sound-based interventions, which critique capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchal structures not as separate forces but as entangled phenomena (Kronberger & Krall, 2021). Degórski (2022), for example, examines Björk's transdisciplinary project *Biophilia* through an agential realist lens, demonstrating how the artist dissolves traditional dualisms by foregrounding the direct material engagement between music, technology, and sensory experience. Such work resists music's commodification under neoliberalism, reclaiming its capacity to shape knowledge through embodied, affective encounters.

Our diffractive engagement demonstrates that music, identity, and marginalisation are not merely intersecting concepts, but co-constituted phenomena that continually shape and reshape each other. This approach moves beyond the additive logic of representation to a relational, intra-active framework that actively reconfigures exclusionary structures. The challenge moving forward is to materialise this understanding into institutional and performative practices that resist exclusion and re-sound historically marginalised voices.

MATERIAL-DISCURSIVE INTRA-ACTIONS

This article builds on an intervention we staged at The Danish Gender Conference in September 2024, featuring reflective performances of solo piano pieces and art songs, selected for their relevance to our scholarly discussion of marginalised composers.

We here aim to disrupt hegemonic forms of academic writing, further challenging neoliberal, and patriarchal academic practices by inviting readers into a multisensory experience. Through our intersectional approach and multisensory method that engages the body and emotions, we aim to challenge the exclusion of marginalised voices in classical music. As part of this, we provide audio listening links, inviting readers to listen to the music while reading, reflecting on both the works and the composers' social contexts. Our approach challenges traditional academic scholarship by weaving music and sound directly into the fabric of knowledge production. This format employs feminist sensory methodologies to foreground affect and create a richer, embodied engagement. By inviting listeners into an embodied encounter with marginalised composers' works, we aim to challenge the disembodied nature of traditional scholarship and encourage a deeper sensory engagement with the lived realities of exclusion.

The multisensory approach outlined in this article has significant implications for academic practices, particularly in feminist musicology and intersectional research. By integrating embodied and affective experiences into scholarly work, this method challenges the dominance of text-based analysis and opens pathways for more inclusive and holistic methodologies. It encourages researchers to move beyond disembodied intellectual frameworks, fostering deeper engagement with the materiality and emotional resonance of artistic works. Moreover, this approach has the potential to transform how scholarship is communicated and experienced, creating space for sensory and participatory dimensions that re-sound marginalised voices. By bridging academic

inquiry with lived, felt experiences, the multisensory method offers a model for future research that is not only analytical but also empathetic and transformative, reshaping the way knowledge is produced and shared. Drawing inspiration from feminist sensory methodologies (Ahmed, 2013; Marks, 2000), we position affect and embodied experiences as central to our research. This methodology engages both the intellectual and emotional dimensions of intersectional exclusion, using music not merely as an object of analysis, but as an active participant in producing knowledge. By inviting readers to listen to music while reading the text, we encourage an emotional and sensory response that adds new layers of meaning to the intellectual content.

Our data collection process centred on uncovering musical pieces in the art song and solo piano repertoire composed by women, alongside conducting archival research into their socio-historical contexts and biographies. Guided by our intersectional feminist framework, we identified composers based on intersecting markers across gender, race, geography, and socio-economic background. Beyond these intersectional considerations, our final selection was shaped by practical and aesthetic considerations, including our ability to perform the music and our own affective resonance with them. This approach reflects our commitment to sensory, embodied methodologies, ensuring that the composers' voices are engaged with not only intellectual inquiry but also through felt, performative experience. In the intervention, we embodied this intersectional learning by performing the selected pieces ourselves, enacting an intra-active engagement with the music that extended beyond textual analysis. This performative dimension allowed us to immerse ourselves in the composers' experiences, rehearsing and interacting with their music not just as scholars but as active participants in their sonic narratives. Through this process, we explored how exclusion is not only theorised but also materialised through embodied encounters with marginalised compositions.

In our musical rehearsals for this intervention,

Richard played the piano and Florence sang; we both engaged with the composers' socio-historical contexts and reflected on how our own identities influenced the music's interpretation. Through this process, we explored how the embodied experience of performing these pieces shaped both our intellectual understanding and our affective engagement with the music. This allowed us to connect the sensory experience of performance with the intellectual analysis of marginalisation. Our methodological commitment deepened through this iterative process, which involved a collaborative narrative analysis informed by intersectional theories. We examined how intersecting identities – of both the composers and us as cis/het performers – shaped artistic expression and marginalisation. This iterative process highlighted how knowledge is co-produced through embodied practice, affective response, and critical reflection.

The value we find in Barad's concept of agential realism lies in viewing music as an active agent that intra-acts with both the listener and its context. Listening, reading, and performing through the concept of agential realism reveal the entangled relationships between the composers, their music, us as performers and researchers, and the readers engaging with our work. Listening, in this context, is thus not passive but an intra-active process where intellectual and emotional engagement coalesce to produce new knowledge. The music not only affects the listener emotionally but also shapes intellectual insights about the intersectional exclusion experienced by these composers. Barad's concept of intra-action further highlights how identities are not only constructed intellectually but are also felt through embodied experience. Barad's work thus grounds multi-sensory approaches as an added dimension to classical social science methods (Petersen, 2016). This also resonates with other work in this journal exploring the extent to which Lady Gaga's embodied performance outside of dominant norms challenges our experience of popular culture (Dilling-Hansen, 2014). In this sense, listening to these composers' works while acknowledging their intersecting identities allows us to feel the compounded oppressions they faced, making the

emotional dimensions of exclusion palpable.

Our identities as performers, shaped by our race, gender, class, geography, and individual experiences, deeply informed how we interpreted and emotionally connected with compositions like Florence Price's *Sunset* and Alma Mahler's *Laue Sommernacht*. This interaction highlighted how the music's affective power and intellectual depth are intertwined, offering insights into the composers' lived experiences. This entanglement influenced our interpretations of the pieces, which in turn shaped how audiences received and understood them. The music, through its intra-action with us as performers, affected not only our emotional responses but also our intellectual engagement with the works, reinforcing Barad's assertion that knowledge is co-produced through material-discursive entanglements. As we navigated the intersectional identities of these composers, we experienced first-hand how their marginalisation was reflected in the affective dimensions of their compositions and in our own responses as performers. By recognising these entangled relationships, we underscore the co-constitutive nature of knowledge production, as described by agential realism, where intellectual understanding and emotional responses are inseparable from the material act of performance and listening.

The unfamiliarity of engaging with this multisensory format is itself a form of epistemic resistance. Discomfort signals a rupture in conventional ways of knowing, prompting audiences to move beyond intellectualised analysis into embodied experience. In this intervention, we invite readers to engage with knowledge not just through text but through sound and sensation. Sensory reflexivity is thus enabled in a way that engages not only the authors (Justenborg & Nilsson, 2023) – but, in our case, the readers of this article. By alternating between reading our words, listening to the music, or doing both simultaneously, audiences can experience the affective and embodied dimensions of the composers' work – dimensions often silenced in conventional scholarship. Importantly, no musical or musicological expertise is

necessary: music's immediacy as an art form makes it deeply accessible. The aim is not merely to deepen intellectual analysis but to reaffirm how affective and cognitive understandings are fundamentally entangled. In doing so, our intervention extends the insights of intersectional feminist theory, demonstrating that exclusion and marginalisation in Western classical music cannot be fully understood without engaging its sensory and affective dimensions.

This multisensory praxis opens new forms of feminist scholarship, ones that not only represent marginalised voices but actively re-sound them, reshaping the structures of what counts as musical, scholarly, and legitimate.

INTERVENTION: INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In the following intervention, we reprise the reflective, narrated performance first staged at the Danish Gender Conference. Rather than treating text and sound as separate modes of engagement, we invite readers into a diffractive experience, where listening and reading intra-act to generate new understandings of exclusion in classical music. While dominant academic practices prioritise intellectual engagement with text, this intervention materialises knowledge differently – through sound, embodiment, and affect. We acknowledge the privilege of being able to disrupt academic norms, first through the conference, and now through this journal. We also acknowledge that engaging sound assumes auditory access, and that not all readers will be able to participate in this way.

As you read and listen, we ask you to reflect on the composers' lived experiences and their music. Do their compositions express their turmoil or resilience? Is it helpful to imagine the composers' emotional states as they composed these works? How is it that personal struggles and intersectional standpoints can result in artistic expression of such universally perceptible beauty?

FAMILIAL RELATIONS AND SOCIAL NORMS

Familial and marital relationships profoundly shaped women composers' creative identities. The stories of Fanny Hensel Mendelssohn and Alma Mahler reveal how gendered expectations within family structures confined women's musical output to private spaces, limiting their public recognition. Their exclusion was shaped by intersecting societal expectations, not gender alone.

LISTEN: *Der Rosenkranz*, Fanny Hensel Mendelssohn

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RD83njHE2Q>

Der Rosenkranz exemplifies the tension between personal ambition and societal expectations, a tension that was embedded in Fanny's familial relationships. Born in 1805 into a well-known, musically educated family, Fanny shared the same musical upbringing as her brother Felix Mendelssohn, but the paths laid out for them were vastly different. Despite her immense talent, Fanny was discouraged from pursuing a public career in music by her father, who believed that her musical talents should remain a private pursuit, suitable only for the domestic sphere. Her brother Felix, although supportive of her talents, was complicit in reinforcing these limitations, reflecting the gender norms of the time. Feminist musicology critiques this divide, where Fanny's exclusion reflects how the concept of musical genius has been historically gendered as masculine. Through an intra-active lens, however, we see that Fanny's exclusion was not merely imposed by familial expectations but continuously enacted through the material-discursive forces of gendered institutions, social norms, and the domestic/private sphere divide.

The creative output of Fanny Hensel Mendelssohn was therefore largely confined to private, intimate settings, where she organized *Sonntagsmusiken* (Sunday musical salons) in her family's home. These gatherings allowed her to compose and perform in a space where she had control, but they were still shielded from public scrutiny. Fanny's marriage to the painter

Wilhelm Hensel offered her a rare supportive relationship, which enabled her to continue composing. Her song *Der Rosenkranz*, with its themes of courtship and personal anxiety, could be read as a metaphor for Fanny's own struggle with the loss of personal creative freedom that accompanied her role as a wife and mother. The tension between public recognition and private creativity is central to understanding the challenges Fanny faced in navigating the patriarchal structures of 19th-century Europe.

LISTEN: *Laue Sommernacht*, Alma Mahler

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v3v4nCYRWYQ>

Alma Mahler's life offers a striking parallel to Fanny Hensel's, though in a different historical and cultural context. *Laue Sommernacht* captures Alma's own unresolved struggle to balance her identity as a composer with the expectations placed on her by her marriage to Gustav Mahler. Alma was a talented composer in her own right, but upon her marriage, Gustav insisted that she renounce her compositional ambitions. This ultimatum reflects the patriarchal dynamics that defined their relationship and the broader societal structures that subordinated women's creative identities to the roles of wife and muse.

Despite her talents, Alma's legacy has often been viewed through the lens of her relationships with prominent male composers such as Gustav Mahler, Alban Berg, and Arnold Schoenberg. The unresolved nature of *Laue Sommernacht*, with its melancholic tone and unfinished narrative, mirrors Alma's personal frustrations and the creative constraints she faced. While Alma supported her husband and other male composers, her own musical ambitions were sacrificed to fulfil her prescribed domestic role. The suppression of her creative identity is emblematic of the ways familial expectations have historically limited women's contributions to the creative industries.

Together, the experiences of Fanny Hensel Mendelssohn and Alma Mahler offer a window into the broader dynamics of familial relations and gendered expectations. Yet, reading about their exclusion

tells only part of the story. Listening to their compositions invites a different kind of engagement – one that transcends textual analysis and allows us to sense, in the music itself, the tensions, struggles, and resistances embedded in their lived experiences. Both women, despite their talents, had to navigate restrictive family structures that constrained their artistic output. Their stories reflect the pervasive influence of familial and societal norms on women’s ability to assert their identities as composers, highlighting the intersection of gender and family in shaping the trajectories of women in classical music.

CLASS CONFINEMENT

Gender and class intersected to constrain women composers like Poldowski and Mel Bonis, shaping how they navigated public and private musical worlds. Their stories reflect compounded exclusions and demonstrate how the classical canon cannot be understood without considering these intersecting forces.

LISTEN: *L’heure exquise*, Poldowski

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2rwIs4XMmSU>

Poldowski, born Régine Wieniawski, the daughter of the famous Polish violinist and composer Henryk Wieniawski, grew up in an aristocratic, cosmopolitan environment that afforded her certain privileges, but also imposed expectations that restricted her public visibility as a composer. Her decision to adopt the pseudonym “Poldowski” was not just a creative choice but also a strategic move to navigate the gendered and class-based pressures that accompanied her identity. This decision reflects feminist musicology’s critique of how women composers have had to navigate exclusionary structures to be heard, demonstrating the ongoing challenges of gendered expectations in the production and reception of music.

L’heure exquise, a setting of a Paul Verlaine poem, reflects this delicate balance between refinement and artistic defiance, highlighting her ability to

work within the aesthetic expectations of her class while subtly challenging them. In common with Poldowski’s music, the song is imbued with a sense of melancholy and introspection, offering a window into her personal struggles as a woman in the upper echelons of society. The use of a pseudonym allowed her to assert her identity in a male-dominated musical world, while simultaneously distancing herself from the expectations of her family’s aristocratic legacy. Her cosmopolitan upbringing, spanning Belgium, England, and France, also influenced her work, as she navigated multiple cultural contexts that shaped her artistic voice. The tension between her refined public persona and her private creative ambitions is palpable in *L’heure exquise*, where the beauty of her composition is underscored by a sense of quiet resistance to the gendered and class-based constraints of her time.

LISTEN: *Sauvez-moi*, Mel Bonis

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Io0G0gWdCF8>

In contrast, Mel Bonis, born Mélanie Bonis, faced more overt class-based limitations as a middle-class woman in late 19th-century France. Mel Bonis’s experience demonstrates how class and gender intersect to limit creative freedom. Intersectional feminist theory reveals how middle-class expectations confined her to the domestic sphere, further compounding her marginalisation as a woman composer. Unlike Poldowski, who had access to elite musical circles, Bonis’s path was marked by greater obstacles. Despite her undeniable talent, Bonis was forced by her family to leave the Paris Conservatoire and find a wealthy husband who had little interest in music and did not care for her to spend time on this “hobby.” Her compositional output, produced under the pseudonym “Mel Bonis,” reflects the dual pressures of her gender and class, as she navigated a society that expected her to prioritise her domestic role over her artistic ambitions.

Sauvez-moi is a vivid example of the emotional depth Bonis achieved in her music, despite the societal constraints placed upon her. The shifting rhythms

and emotional turbulence of the piece reflect Bonis's inner turmoil, as she struggled to reconcile her artistic identity with the expectations of her middle-class status. Her use of a pseudonym, much like Poldowski, was a means of asserting her creative independence in a society that sought to confine her to the private, domestic sphere. Bonis's life, marked by her dual identity as a respectable bourgeois wife and a passionate, bold composer, reveals the intricate ways in which class and gender intersect to shape women's experiences in the classical music world.

The stories of Poldowski and Mel Bonis illustrate how class confinement adds an additional layer of complexity to the gendered expectations placed on women composers. Both women navigated the intersection of class and gender in different ways, using pseudonyms and their artistic output to resist societal limitations. Their music, characterised by emotional depth and subtle defiance, challenges us to reconsider the role of class in shaping women's creative identities. Moreover, rather than viewing gender and class as intersecting yet separate barriers, a diffractive lens reveals how these forces co-constitute exclusion, producing unique constraints that shape both the form and reception of women's compositions. For women, belonging to a higher class may be a source of intersectional exclusion as well as privilege. While acknowledging that upper-class status afforded them exposure to classical music, we also recognise the constraints imposed by societal expectations tied to their class.

GEOGRAPHIES AND CULTURES

The intersection of gender, geography, and culture shaped the creative expressions of composers like Dobrinka Tabakova and Agathe Backer Grøndahl. Tabakova, born in Bulgaria and educated in London, resists dominant compositional norms by prioritizing emotional clarity over complexity, thereby challenging aesthetic hierarchies that privilege masculine-coded abstraction. Her work exemplifies how gender, geography, and culture intra-act to shape musical voice and reception. Like others who

navigate transnational influences, Tabakova's music emerges from a negotiation between local identity and global expectations in classical music.

LISTEN: *Nocturne*, Dobrinka Tabakova

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CLhd9VGYp6w>

Nocturne, composed in her twenties, reflects Tabakova's commitment to emotional directness and formal clarity. The piece is accessible yet richly expressive, blending her Bulgarian musical heritage with the cosmopolitan influences of her British education. Tabakova has spoken of the pressure to produce music that appears visually complex on the page, an academic aesthetic often aligned with masculine-coded authority in composition. Her resistance to this expectation challenges institutional norms that equate value with complexity, positioning emotional clarity as a feminist aesthetic gesture. In doing so, she exemplifies how women composers navigate entangled pressures of gendered reception, technical legitimacy, and cultural identity.

As we listen to *Nocturne*, we are reminded of how musical choices reflect more than personal style, they are shaped by institutional, geographic, and gendered expectations. Tabakova's refusal to conform to dominant aesthetic hierarchies opens space for thinking about voice, clarity, and resistance as entangled forces in contemporary music-making. Her work offers a compelling example of how feminist new materialist analysis can attend to affective, embodied choices shaped by transnational contexts.

Turning to another geographical and cultural context, we consider Agathe Backer Grøndahl, a Norwegian composer who, despite the progressive values often associated with the Nordic region, faced significant challenges in gaining recognition. Born in 1847, Backer Grøndahl's career reflects the complexities of navigating the intersection of gender and cultural expectations within a region that, on the surface, appeared more egalitarian.

LISTEN: *Lind (Blomstervignetten)*, Agathe Backer

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Ao3iiNHQ4>

The song we present – *Lind* – comes from her collection *Blomstervignetter*, and evokes the natural landscapes of her homeland, reflecting her deep connection to the Norwegian environment. However, despite her prolific output and critical acclaim as a pianist, Backer Gröndahl's music was often dismissed as "conservative" due to its adherence to traditional forms rather than the avant-garde trends of her time. This critique, frequently levelled at women composers, demonstrates the biases within classical music that devalue work not seen as innovative by male-dominated critical standards. It highlights feminist musicology's critique of aesthetic hierarchies, where male-dominated avant-garde trends are privileged over other forms of musical expression.

Like Tabakova, Backer Gröndahl's work reveals the influence of her geographical and cultural context, yet it also shows how these same factors can contribute to her marginalisation. Despite being from a region celebrated for its progressive values, Backer Gröndahl faced the same gendered limitations as her European counterparts, further illustrating that the challenges faced by women composers transcend geographic boundaries. Backer Gröndahl's experience reflects intersectional feminist theory's insight into how national identity and gender intersect to compound exclusion, as her Norwegian background and adherence to traditional forms marked her as an outsider within the male-dominated, avant-garde Western classical tradition.

Through the lens of these composers, we see how geography and culture intersect with gender to shape both the opportunities and limitations placed on women in classical music. Whether it is Tabakova's blending of Bulgarian and Western influences or Backer Gröndahl's connection to the Nordic landscape, these composers challenge us to consider how place and cultural background influence creative expression and recognition. By expanding our focus to include these geographical and cultural

dimensions, we deepen our understanding of how composers like Tabakova and Backer Gröndahl navigate complex social and artistic landscapes. Their stories remind us that the exclusion of women's voices in classical music is not just a result of gender alone but is shaped by intersecting factors of place, culture, and societal expectations.

RACIALISED DISCRIMINATION

Gender and race intersected to intensify the marginalisation of composers like Florence Price and Shelley Washington, whose music reflects both their gendered experiences and the racial discrimination they faced in a field dominated by white men.

LISTEN: *Sunset*, Florence Price

<https://youtu.be/Dvmd81khReg?si=DtpAtsLunFFG1Mvh>

Florence Price's *Sunset* exemplifies the resilience she embodied as the first Black American woman to have an orchestral piece performed by a major U.S. orchestra. Born in 1887 in Little Rock, Arkansas, Price's career was shaped by the systemic barriers of the racially segregated American South. Despite her immense talent, Price was often forced to compose under pseudonyms and faced significant racial and gender-based discrimination throughout her career. Engaging with Florence Price's music through a multisensory framework allows for a fuller appreciation of her contributions, revealing the emotional and embodied experiences that are often silenced by text-based analyses. This challenges the dominance of disembodied scholarship in understanding marginalised voices.

Price's personal life was marked by significant hardships, including financial instability and an abusive first marriage. However, she persevered, producing over 300 compositions that blended European classical forms with African American spirituals, hymns, and folk traditions. *Sunset*, written in 1938, captures the emotional depth and complexity of Price's music,

reflecting both the beauty of her artistry and the resilience required to navigate a field that systematically excluded Black women. Her work, long overshadowed by the dominance of White male composers, is only now beginning to receive the recognition it deserves, a testament to the enduring impact of race and gender on the visibility of women composers.

LISTEN: *Towers*, Shelley Washington

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dxCaZHhAGLQ>

Shelley Washington's work, though composed in a more contemporary context, resonates with long-standing struggles around race, gender, and institutional exclusion. In *Towers*, Washington confronts the entanglement of race, gender, and academia, drawing on her experience as a Black woman in predominantly white musical and academic spaces. Her programme notes express the isolation, pressure, and hypervisibility she experiences; challenges echoed by many women of colour navigating historically white institutions in classical music.

Washington's compositional style blends classical, jazz, and rock influences, creating hybrid sonic spaces that foreground Black and queer voices within the classical tradition. *Towers* functions as both a personal reflection and a critique of institutional whiteness and patriarchy. Her genre-defying practice exemplifies intersectional feminist insights into how race and gender co-constitute exclusion, revealing how structural marginalisation operates not only through access but through the very aesthetic norms of the field. Washington's work resonates with feminist musicology's call to dismantle Eurocentric, masculine-coded genre hierarchies by redefining what counts as legitimate musical expression.

Together, Washington and Tabakova challenge us to reimagine the boundaries of classical music; not only through who composes it, but how its aesthetic and institutional norms are shaped by gender, race, geography, and power. Their work exemplifies the need for feminist analyses that are both intersectional and sensory, attuned to how exclusion operates through

sound as much as through structures.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we engage in a diffractive analysis of the exclusion of women from the Western classical music canon, intertwining intersectionality and feminist new materialism to illuminate how each perspective enriches the other for these ends. By examining the intra-action of gender, race, class, and geography in shaping musical exclusion, we foreground marginalisation not as a static or historical condition, but as a process that is materially and discursively sustained. This insight builds on existing feminist musicological work, while extending it through our methodological innovation: inviting readers to *listen* as they read, thereby fostering an embodied and affective engagement with feminist and postcolonial critiques of disembodied knowledge.

In doing so, we contribute to feminist intersectional studies of the creative industries and feminist musicology, with an aim not just to name exclusion, but to begin unlearning it and generating new grammars of knowing. Our article extends feminist critiques of canon formation by moving beyond additive or representational approaches. Rather than inserting women into existing evaluative frameworks, we interrogate how those frameworks (shaped by gendered, racialised, and classed norms) are themselves reproduced and naturalised. Our intervention also addresses limitations within intersectionality, responding to critiques of its tendency to fix identity categories, and instead offering a new materialist lens that understands marginalisation as dynamically produced through material-discursive entanglements. In this way, our diffractive methodology does not only analyse exclusion but enacts a mode of thinking, writing, and listening through which exclusion can be differently understood.

The implications of this work are significant for institutions that mediate cultural legitimacy, such as orchestras, conservatoires, festivals, and funding bodies. Repertoire choices, audition protocols, and

dominant narratives about “excellence” and “genius” remain bound to aesthetic hierarchies that systematically marginalise. Tackling these inequalities requires more than increasing the visibility of women and racialised composers; it demands a fundamental rethinking of the evaluative standards that render certain sounds valuable and others disposable. Our multisensory method offers one route; foregrounding listening, embodiment, and epistemic justice as practices through which institutions might begin to transform, not simply diversify, their cultures.

More broadly, our methodological reorientation speaks to academic knowledge production itself. By weaving sound into scholarly form, we resist disembodied models of rigour and open space for affective, plural, and relational ways of knowing. The performance-based intervention we first staged, and the listening experiences embedded in this article, challenge conventional understandings of what counts as data, method, and argument, and confront the epistemic hierarchies that continue to shape our disciplines. While we acknowledge that such interventions may

unsettle established norms and carry risk in institutions still shaped by colonial, patriarchal, and extractive logics, we argue that this very unsettling is a necessary condition for transformation. These practices offer a model for enacting feminist and decolonial commitments not only in what we study, but in how we study it, and in whose voices are made heard.

Looking forward, we contend that exclusion in classical music cannot be addressed through representation alone. What is needed is a deeper interrogation of how power moves through sonic regimes, institutional practices, and aesthetic values. Even well-intentioned diversity initiatives risk reproducing neoliberal logics of individual merit and market appeal if they do not attend to these entangled structures. Our intervention calls not only for rewriting history, but for listening differently: not simply to new names or repertoires, but to the relational, affective, and institutional forces through which exclusion is continuously (re)produced. This is not merely a call for action – it is a call for attunement.

[1] Represented statistically amongst composers; represented in the corpus of publicly available scores; and represented in performance programmes (nb: in French, the term *représentation* also designates a stage performance).

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