

# What Did Women Sing? A Chronology concerning Female Choristers

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## What Did Women Sing? A Chronology concerning Female Choristers

*Laura Stanfield Prichard*

### Abstract

The voices of women have been suppressed, avoided, and even banned throughout the history of choral music, but new archival research reveals the power of their musical presence in the seventeenth nineteenth centuries. Some cultural centers such as Ferrara and Venice were renowned for their female musicians, but womens voices were heard throughout Baroque Europe. Northern German and French church music programs and opera companies usually included womens voices. Composers such as Monteverdi, Vivaldi, Handel, and Mozart traveled widely and composed for women, castrati, and male falsettists. Early operas and oratorios often replaced male singers with women in revivals of successful works.

As Paris, Amsterdam, and London became renowned as centers of music publishing, diverse ensembles arose to satisfy a more sophisticated level of taste. Convents, cloisters, and schools employed women as musicians, and both men and women participated in colonial singing schools. During the revolutionary period, attitudes and assumptions about gender roles shifted dramatically, and performance practice revealed the politics of the times.

North American and European singing societies and clubs commissioned many of the great masterworks of the Classical and early Romantic periods. Choral conductors who are concerned with issues of authenticity and appropriation in choral scoring should be aware of the original makeup of these commissioning and premiering ensembles. Building on the groundbreaking research of musicologist Neal Zaslaw, who has verified the makeup of every orchestra Mozart conducted, this paper will present an annotated catalog of over 100 choral masterworks, detailing exactly when and how womens voices were included in specific choral performance. An appendix of firsts will be included (first female cantor, first female conductor, first female ensembles of various types).

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Laura Stanfield Prichard holds degrees in musicology, conducting, and music librarianship from Yale University and University of Illinois, where she was a CIC Traveling Scholar to the University of Chicago. Laura is a regular lecturer and writer for the San Francisco Symphony, Chicago Symphony, Boston Baroque, the Berkshire Choral Festival, and several Boston opera companies. Laura teaches courses in music and history for the University of Massachusetts and Nashua Community College and has directed the music program at the First Parish Church of Arlington, Massachusetts (USA) since 2003. Both Laura and her husband, Michael, perform regularly with the Coro Hispano de San Francisco, Schola Adventus, Tanglewood Festival Chorus, Boston Pops, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

A former assistant conductor for the San Francisco Symphony Chorus, Laura received the California State University Professional Promise Award for eight years of teaching at CSU-Hayward, San Jose State, and San Francisco State from 1995-2003. She is a past conductor of Sgerchor Boston and the Sharing a New Song international traveling chorus. Her recent publications include articles in the 2013 New Grove Dictionary of American Music, the Greenwood Encyclopedia of Latin American Popular Music, and over a dozen editorial prefaces for Musikproduktion Hlich in Munich.

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The exclusion of women from liturgical choral ensembles may have created an appreciation for the aesthetic of the immature male voice. The female voice, free to participate in singing at home and in the processions and celebrations outside the temple, was not heard within its walls (Dickinson 29). This contravention had the force of the Halakah (Schleifer 23-24), the legal rulings of the Gemara, the section of the Talmud which provides the commentary to the Mishna--the "text of the Oral Law"--of the Talmud (Bridgwater 1939). Its rulings addressed the question quite explicitly: "'Men singing and women answering is promiscuity; women singing and men answering like fire set to chaff' (Sotah 48a)" (

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