

MUSFORUM



By Gail Archer

My work as a concert organist has taken me around the United States and Europe for 20 years. In my travels, I've heard increasing concerns from women colleagues about their career trajectories and the disappointing experiences they've had in their attempts to move forward. They spoke of being passed over in the application and promotion process, of being dismissed when their music program received attention in the press or overshadowed the leadership. The women relating these experiences are composers, conductors, and organists, highly educated and skilled musicians who struggle to move forward in spite of their accomplishments. This is a world turned upside down, a field in need of reform and bold, new criteria for equal-opportunity hiring based on skills and education.

Determined to do something to address the issues raised by my women colleagues, I set out to document the number of women organists in leadership positions in North America; the project took two years, 2011–2013. The results were published in the spring 2013 *Journal of the International Alliance of Women in Music* (vol. 19, no. 1). The article may be read on my website: gailarcher.com/iawm_2013_journal.pdf. The survey looked at conservatories, colleges, and cathedrals in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico, as I attempted to identify institutions that placed women in positions of influence and leadership. Many women contributed time and energy in assisting me in this project, and I gratefully acknowledge their support.

The conservatories were the easiest component of the survey, as I could search the website of each institution in order to determine the faculty. At the time of the survey, Roberta Gary, at Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music, was the only woman chair of a conservatory organ program in North America; she has since retired. The list of organ programs on the American Guild of Organists website was the starting point for the college survey. In this instance, my colleagues

were critical in revealing information about the hiring process and successful searches at the college level. The survey revealed that there were 82 women teaching organ at colleges and universities; 44 of these women held a DMA degree in organ performance, and nearly all of them worked at liberal arts colleges in small towns. At the time of the survey, only two women taught organ at a research university in a major city in the U.S.: Arizona State University, Tempe, and the University of Washington, Seattle; the teacher at the latter university has retired.

In order to assess large faith communities, I limited the search in the U.S. to 13 major cities by population: Boston, New York, Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Chicago, Houston, Dallas, Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Phoenix. Churches of any denomination with 1,500 members or

leagues around the world, which I update regularly. Musforum, a combined form that means “music forum” as well as a “forum for the Muses,” was launched in 2013. There is no cost to join us, and any woman organist at any point in her career may email me at garcher@barnard.edu to join the network. Today there are about 350 women in the group, and we have held three conferences to date: New York, 2015, Omaha, 2017, and St. Olaf College, 2019. Our next gathering will take place, health considerations permitting, at Arizona State University in May 2022. At the conferences, we have featured entirely women performers and lecturers in a two-day format. We always have a keynote address; recitals by student organists and seasoned professionals; workshops on hymnody, conducting, and programming; festive lunches and dinners; and a gala concluding event.



Twin Cities organists Lisa Karänen, Jennifer Anderson, and Kathy Borgen



Young organists Katie Moss, Susan Powell, and Martha Barth

more were included in the survey. In the U.S. there were nine women leading major church programs; there were also three in Canada and one in Mexico. The majority of women liturgical musicians found success in towns, exactly the same as the college programs. Notably, Omaha, a small city of about one million people, is the only city in the U.S. in which a woman music director serves at both the Episcopal and Roman Catholic cathedrals.

Please take note of the facts: Today, there are no women leading independent conservatory organ programs, there is one woman leading an organ program at a research university in a major U.S. city, Phoenix, and there are two women leading cathedral music programs in New York City and Houston. There are about 80 women teaching organ at liberal arts colleges and research universities in towns.

After the publication of the survey, I set up a website, Musforum (Musforum.org), and posted the data there. I then reached out internationally and added the data for our women col-

leagues around the world, which I update regularly. There is a positive spirit at these gatherings, as we are advocates for women organists in liturgical music and higher education and aim to support our colleagues in reaching their professional goals and aspirations.

Interested readers may visit the Musforum site to review the programs and photos from our meetings, but I would like to convey some of the highlights from our most recent conference. Minnesota Musforum at St. Olaf College took place on June 13–14, 2019. As always, we featured instrumental ensembles and choirs of women in addition to the organists. At St. Olaf, we presented Windworks, a women’s wind ensemble, in a program of American, French, and British composers, including a work by St. Olaf professor of music Steven Amundson, *Sempre Dolce* (2017), and a lively jazz set, *Mississippi Five*, by James Parker. The See Change Chamber Choir from the Twin Cities gave a rousing performance on Friday evening of works by women and men, notably pieces by their founder, Angela Broeker.



Windworks artists Kay Sahlin, Dana Maeda, Cindy Bailey, Becky Jyrkas, and Jo Ann Polley

As we were in the Midwest, the young organist recital featured Martha Barth from St. Olaf College and Susan Powell and Katie Moss from Indiana University. Continuing that theme, there was a Twin Cities recital by professional women: Liisa Keränen, Kathy Borger, and Jennifer Anderson. The solo organ recitalists included Nancy Ypma from McKendree University, Karen Black from Wartburg College, and Marie Rubis Bauer from St. Cecilia Cathedral, Omaha. The keynote speaker was Lyn Loewi, and our three lectures were presented by Therees Hibbard (Women in Choral Music), Kathrine Handford (French Contemporary Organ Literature), and Susan Palo Cherwien (Poetry and Music in American Hymn Texts). The gala recital on Saturday evening featured Cathy Rodland, Shelly Moorman-Stahlman, and Nicole Keller. All the programs comprised music by international women composers.

The conference was funded by grants from Barnard College, Columbia University, and St. Olaf College. The registration fee for our conferences is \$100, with a low charge for housing, as we stay in the college dormitories. Meals and the wine and cheese hour are included, and our performers participate without a fee. This structure works beautifully, as it is as affordable as it is inspiring. My women colleagues are separated by great distances, and the Musforum conference allows us to get together to exchange ideas and support one another.

The challenges for women organists in the 21st century are greater than ever. Building a career takes determination and stamina, as we must constantly rise above a culture that diminishes education, ability, and accomplishment. As in many other fields, a woman organist must accomplish many times more than her male colleagues in order to achieve any recognition at all. Musforum is designed to level the playing field, celebrate the accomplishments of women musicians, and change the culture so that women may make an important contribution to the field of choir and organ in future.

Gail Archer is college organist at Vassar College and director of music at Barnard College, Columbia University, where she directs the Barnard-Columbia Chorus and Chamber Singers. She is a member of the faculty at the Harriman Institute and Columbia University, and artistic director of the artist and student recitals at Central Synagogue in New York City.