

I See and Hear Things Differently Now – Students’ Experiences of the ERASMUS+ Project Voices of Women

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Abstract: The interdisciplinary ERASMUS+ project Voices of Women (VOW) commenced in January 2022, bringing students and teachers from Norway, the Netherlands, and Germany together. One of the main objectives of VOW was to familiarize students and audiences with art songs created by women composers from 19th and 20th century Europe.

The purpose of this article is to present results from the research project Agents of Change, where we shed light on the students’ perceptions of the VOW project. We have investigated students’ knowledge of women composers and their representation in the arts, their thoughts about gender balance, and the significance the VOW project has had for their own choice of repertoire and artistic work. The empirical material of this article is based on 125 answers from questionnaires during the project over two years (2022–2024).

The analyses reveal that the students possessed limited knowledge of women composers prior to participating in the VOW project. The students continuously highlight the crucial significance of diversity and underscore the necessity for achieving a more balanced and inclusive representation of women in the arts and in the higher music education curriculum. In assessing whether VOW has influenced the

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students’ perspectives on women composers, the analysis reveals a positive impact. Those findings indicate that educational projects that are directed towards change may have a more general impact on society at large, due to students’ development as critical thinkers and broad performing activities beyond academia.

Keywords: higher music education, art song, curriculum transformation, gender balance, societal change

Introduction

The transnational project *Voices of Women* commenced in January 2022 and ends in October 2024. Participants are conservatory/university music performance and literature students, and teachers/researchers in music performance, musicology, gender research, cultural studies, and literature studies from the University of Stavanger, Norway; UiT The Arctic University of Norway; the University of Groningen, the Netherlands; and the University of Music FRANZ LISZT Weimar, Germany. The VOW project has two primary objectives: 1. to enhance familiarity with musical compositions crafted by women: concretely, the performing repertoire of *art song* from the 19th and 20th century Europe and 2. to build a Voices of Women network and devise a corresponding roadmap for transformative action. Up to now there have been five meetings, which have been either in person, digital or a mix of both.

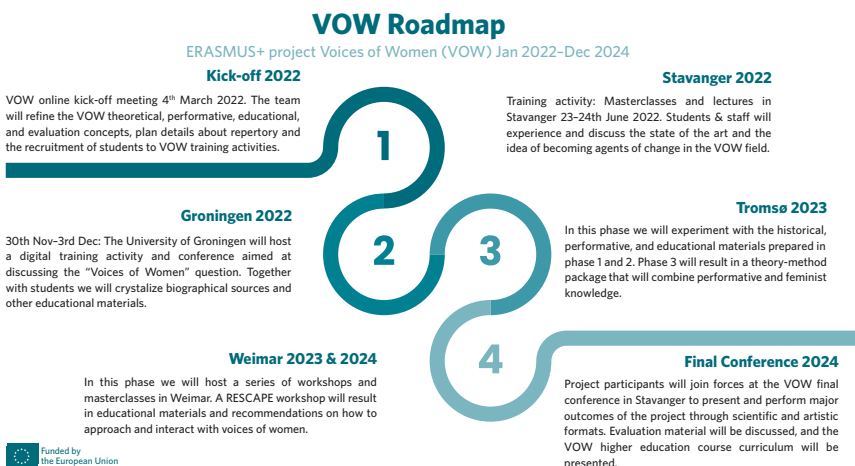


Figure 1. Overview of the structure of the VOW project (By Lilli Mittner, CC BY 4.0).

The inception of the VOW project stemmed from the observed underrepresentation of women composers in music performances and educational settings. The project seeks to empower and secure the rightful presence of women in music production across historical, modern, and future landscapes: all voices and gender representations shall be heard. By spotlighting women composers, VOW strives to elevate cultural consciousness rooted in an overlooked and underestimated historical heritage, which deserves greater attention, analysis, interpretation, and performance. The project is based on the idea of social innovation in which all those who become involved gain a better understanding of normative complexities and why and how to act more inclusively within the specific field of music performance. In terms of curriculum transformation, this is the third of six stages proposed by Schuster & Van Dyne (1985; see also Mittner, 2018).

The woman composer question has been central to feminist musicology for decades, and the surge of interest in forgotten women composers and broader inquiries into the intersections of music, gender, and sexuality within musicology has been central from the very beginning. Pivotal publications such as Cohen's *International Encyclopedia of Women Composers* (1981), encompassing over 5,000 names, marked a turning point. In Norway, Lindhjem (1931) raised the question at the beginning of the 20th century, and Paulsen (1980), Dahm (1987), and later Halstead (1997) wrote important contributions to make women composers visible and to scrutinize the reasons for their ongoing invisibility. Parallel thinking practices emerged in Germany (Hoffmann, 1998; Rieger, 1981) and the US (Bowers & Tick, 1986; Citron, 1993; McClary, 1991; Schleifer & Glickman, 1996–2006).

During the last decades, groundbreaking projects on women composers have been established, e.g. Kvast in Sweden (a non-profit association whose main purpose is to increase awareness of women composers), or individual researchers' projects (e.g. Kvalbein, 2022; Välimäki, 2022;). Other projects on music and gender include research on the choice of what instrument to play (Abeles, 2009; Blix & Ellefsen, 2021; Meling, 2019) and power relations in the classroom (Abramo, 2009; Green, 1997). In recent years, feminist scholars have applied feminist theories in related

fields such as sound studies (Tiainen, 2018), art and dementia (Mittner, 2021) and aesthetics (Macarthur, 2002). Music education has had a special focus on intersectionality (Werner, 2019), sexual harassment in music spaces (Wilson, 2002) and social change (Hess, 2019; Kertz-Welzel, 2022).¹ However, while research has delved into gender from students' perspectives, examining the broader institutional perspective (de Boise, 2017; Werner & Kuusi, 2023), there remains an absence of research exploring students' perspectives regarding women composers in the curriculum and the presence of a more gender-balanced repertoire in higher music education.

At the start of the VOW project, we established the research project *Agents of Change*, where we wanted to shed light on the students' perspectives and understanding of women composers and gender balance in the arts. Additionally, we aimed to investigate the potential impact of the VOW project in shaping the students' own repertoire and artistic endeavors. Moreover, we sought to explore how students could cultivate, embody, and convey more nuanced and gender-sensitive perspectives on musical histories. Construction of knowledge was central, and our research question was formulated as a threefold question: (1) what kind of knowledge do students have of women composers and their representation in the arts; (2) which attitudes do students have towards gender balance and the specific repertoires created by women composers; (3) how do students describe the effect of the VOW project on their own artistic development. Given that the VOW project was a pedagogical project, we were also interested in investigating the project's learning situation. The purpose of this article is to present our findings from the evaluation sessions of the VOW project, and to explore our research questions.

The empirical foundation of the research project and the results presented in this article comprise 125 responses obtained from questionnaires administered before and after each VOW project meeting over a two-year period (2022–2024). These responses are complemented by

¹ It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a full literature review on music and gender research: for a partial overview of Norway, Germany and The Netherlands, see Mittner et al., 2022.

theoretical reflections, insights gathered from discussions with participating students and the three authors' personal reflections and observations, coming from three different fields: music history and performance (Meling), pedagogy (Meland), and gender studies (Mittner). The authors have undergone a collaborative writing process and collective analysis, where effective communication and collaboration tools (e.g., Google Docs, shared folders, regular meetings) have facilitated seamless integration of contributions and maintained a unified voice.

The article is organized as follows: firstly, a detailed exposition is provided on the VOW project itself, elucidating its methodology and activities. Subsequently, the empirical study is presented, focusing on the questionnaire responses. Following this, we contextualize the responses, including a discussion of the lack of accessible material, gender balance, and the woman composer question. The article concludes with a concise section outlining the continuing need of educating agents of change.

Educating agents of change

The VOW project's methodology encompasses a blend of interconnected activities, including masterclasses, concert preparations, conferences, lectures, lecture recitals, student-driven discussion groups (with topics like gender issues in jazz, feminist practice in teaching, male vs female genius, and historical research on gender gaps in music institutions), workshops, online teaching, work with historical source material, and evaluation seminars. VOW thus creates an interdisciplinary forum for sharing music making, engaging in conversations, workshops, panels, and discussions. It does not have a fixed syllabus: this depends on the material the students want to work on. The project emphasizes the necessity to educate agents of change, which means: (1) knowledge of women composers and their works, (2) attitudes towards a new repertoire, where student takes more initiative to find out why they are forgotten and the problematic sides of Western art music canon, and (3) knowledge of how to perform the new repertoire.

The students are mainly female bachelor students in classical music performance. Most of them are voice majors, in addition to a few pianists

and other instrumentalists. There are also a few non-music majors, mainly from literature studies. All these students have taken an active step to be part of this project and have expressed an interest in and a curiosity about the topic. They are all open and eager to learn, both theoretical concepts and the applied methods in their performances, and they have expressed an openness to other cultures and different gender expressions.

A pivotal aspect of the project involves the masterclasses, where students showcase their performances of songs to the rest of the group and receive feedback from voice professors, fellow students, and collaborative pianists. In the last sessions, the project included genres like jazz, however, the VOW project's main focus is on 19th century art song, denoting a vocal musical composition typically crafted for a single voice accompanied by the piano. Beyond acquiring knowledge of the repertoire and interpretative approaches to the music, students also delve into the poetry, textual significance and translations, and explore the aesthetic and social contexts of their selected composers. At the seminar's conclusion, students present their chosen songs at a public concert.

Central to our pedagogical methods in the project is the *flipped classroom*: a pedagogical model where students work with the learning material before they come to class, freeing class time for applied learning opportunities. It is a consensus among researchers that this is more conducive to learning compared to other more conventional methods (Freeman et al., 2014). We use this method in the applied music activities (where the students prepare material to perform), in the lectures (where they beforehand have read articles and material about the topics), and in the workshops. One of the central workshops in the project uses the *RESCAPE* method, where the students before the session have worked on historical source material. *RESCAPE*, short for Research – Education – Sources – Creativity – Art – Performance – Engagement, is a method that involves three key steps. Initially, the students research and blend various forms of historical documents (journals, letters, postcards, notes, etc.), and artistic expressions to create fictional dialogues between historical figures. Next, these dialogues are performed on stage. Lastly, workshop participants reinterpret the materials to create new dramatic compositions rooted in the same sources but with different contexts. The

RESCAPE method encourages innovative ways of storytelling, and the performative engagement with the materials results in new insights into cultural history.

Triggering creativity and imagination through performative methods as explained above offers students the opportunity to create novel narratives that are rooted in their own experiences. Employing the RESCAPE method to craft stories, students position themselves at the forefront of the discourse, delving into their personal encounters with gender roles and other normative complexities. By examining depictions of women in classical music and engaging in their own creative endeavors, students start to recognize and analyze societal expectations that connect to gender and power relations. This process facilitates participation in critical thinking and discussions, integral to instigating social change.

Collaborating with our students, the general core of the project resides in critical pedagogies and feminist principles, that put question marks on the self, agency, and transformative leaning. As O’Sullivan et al. (2002, p. 22) delineate, “Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions.” Unlike traditional learning, which focuses on knowledge acquisition and skill development through structured, teacher-centered methods, transformative learning seeks to change learners’ perspectives and behaviors through critical reflection, dialogue, and active engagement and asserts that experiences can profoundly reshape one’s perspective, often sparked by sudden insights. These moments prompt reflection on newfound knowledge and its impact on comprehension. Thus, the VOW project establishes an arena for transformative learning, akin to the notion of the *tentacular classroom* as Branlat et al. (2022) proposed.

Rooted in constructivism, it suggests learners create meaning by merging new knowledge with existing understandings. Imsen (2020) highlights that constructivism emphasizes the importance of active participation in learning, where students create their own understanding and knowledge through experiences and reflection. Additionally, constructivism fosters critical thinking by encouraging students to explore, ask questions, and solve problems and emphasizes the active role of learners in constructing their own understanding rather than acquiring it passively

(Brooks & Brooks, 1999). Constructivism can therefore fit as a theoretical framework for our project, however, several parts of our project, like e.g. the performative approach and the idea of becoming an agent of change through and with music, are also linked to feminist posthumanism (Braidotti, 2021). As the project emphasizes open-ended and dynamic processes, it is shaped by what teachers, students and audience bring in and equally impacts the way all of the involved become agents of change. Feminist posthumanist theories highlight how learning and transformation occur not just within individuals, but through their encounters with the music, other students, and the learning situations (Taylor, 2017). Furthermore, it explains how identities and roles are dynamic and shaped by interconnected relationships, challenging notions of fixed identity and emphasizing the importance of collective learning.

The students' experiences of the project

Preceding the VOW sessions, to prepare participants, an online *Nettskjema* was distributed. *Nettskjema* is a web-based survey tool developed by the University of Oslo, serving as a secure data capture tool with a variety of features for gathering, storing, and analyzing data. This instrument probed participants' knowledge and attitudes toward the subject matter and sought to discern any changes over the project period. Additionally, inquiries were made regarding participants' involvement in activities related to women composers since the preceding session and whether the project had influenced their own artistic endeavors. This became part of the research project *Agents of Change*. We got approval from the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, SIKT. Once the SIKT application was approved, we initiated the data collection process. Each informant was briefed on the survey's purpose and how their data would be gathered, conducted, and utilized.

At the conclusion of each encounter in the VOW project, a comprehensive evaluation session ensued, featuring the administration of a paper-and-pencil questionnaire to participants. Subsequently, dialogues were conducted with the students to solicit additional insights. The overarching objective of these evaluations was to cultivate a positive milieu

conducive to open discussions and reflective practices. Our intention was for students to first engage in individual project contemplation and then partake in collective cognitive processes through interactions with peers and educators.

Our data collection approach aligns with an evaluation methodology. This framework emphasizes the practical implementation of a program to gain a deep understanding of the conditions associated with identifying factors that may impact the achieved results (Kim et al., 2017). Evaluation is typically conducted concurrently with implementation, allowing for real-time adjustments and improvements, as exemplified by our approach. At the same time, while evaluation and research share some methodological similarities and can overlap in practice, they serve distinct purposes and employ different approaches (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Evaluation focuses on assessing specific programs, like VOW, whereas research aims to broaden general knowledge and understanding. For our evaluation material to be used as research material, it had to meet the standards of validity, reliability, and generalizability. In our research, it also meant reanalyzing data and applying different theoretical frameworks. We have also taken into consideration research ethics, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the protection of participants' rights.

After reading through the data material multiple times and attempting to identify themes, we turned to the recommendation of Braun & Clarke (2006) regarding thematic analysis for qualitative data. Thematic analysis identifies patterns in data, revealing diverse viewpoints and informant experiences. It also unveils connections and statement alignment (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Braun & Clarke (2006) outline six phases for thematic analysis. The first phase entails familiarizing oneself with the data. We achieved this while evaluating the data, noting ideas and themes to gain a thorough understanding. Transitioning to phase two, Braun & Clarke (2006) emphasize understanding the data and listing interesting aspects. Here, we developed more detailed initial codes, building upon phase one. The codes identify data features, presenting the most interesting findings in the analysis. They are theory-driven, aligning with the study's research questions. Continuing into phase three, we followed Braun &

Clarke's advice to search for specific themes, using formulated codes to compare data content. We experimented with combinations, then developed four main themes: "knowledge of women composers and their representation in the arts", "gender balance", "the students' roles in change processes", and "consequences of new knowledge and awareness in their own artistic activities." In addition, we looked at the theme "the learning environment", although we did not ask specifically about it in the questionnaire. In phase four, we reviewed and refined the themes from phase three. Braun & Clarke highlight this phase as crucial for assessing theme data adequacy and similarity. In phase four, none of the themes required discarding. According to Braun & Clarke, this phase involves defining and naming the developed themes concisely. We wrote brief descriptions of each theme to ensure clarity. Lastly, we addressed the sixth and final phase, which focused on developing and reporting the analysis findings as results.

The evaluation forms were anonymous and the students' answers were numbered and identified from ST₁ and upwards to ST₁₂₅. We have not tracked one single student's perceptions continuously (since they answer anonymously), but we present here the main results, extracted from the given answers.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations in our research methods. We recognize that questionnaires may not fully capture the depth of students' opinions, potentially resulting in responses that lack thoroughness. There is also a possibility that students may have chosen to give superficial answers, which in turn affects the robustness of our data. Additionally, the variation in how the students may have interpreted the questions also poses a risk, as they may have formulated answers based on our expectations. In addition, cultural differences and language barriers may also have influenced the data material. In response to these limitations, validity was attempted to be improved by using open-ended questions. Such questions should encourage students to write in their own words and elaborate on their own answers. The methods we employed—reducing and systematizing data, and thematizing interview statements—are integral to qualitative analysis and are grounded in interpretivist and constructivist theoretical frameworks.

These approaches align with the principles outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006) and resonate with the constructivist perspective that knowledge is built through subjective experiences and interactions.

Results

In the following sections we present the results of the thematic analysis, where each of the themes forms a subchapter. We will both include students' quotations from the themes and summarize our findings.

Theme one: Knowledge of women composers and their representation in the arts

The analyses reveal that students possessed a very limited knowledge of women composers prior to the VOW project. Most of the students answered “poor”, when asked about their knowledge of women composers, and in conversations, they knew very few names of works or composers. At the same time, the majority were of the opinion that it was important to know about women composers and they seemed very aware of the challenges women composers had been facing by focusing on various historical and current factors. They stated that women in the arts have encountered various obstacles, such as difficulties in publishing, limited resources, and a lack of recognition from their male counterparts, all of which have markedly impeded their opportunities. The lack of representation in classical music has also contributed to stereotypical perceptions against women.

I think it could be because of the social status of women and women composing music in their time. Mostly the music they wrote was to be used in the home or on small stages, and didn't get the audience and recognition like men did. (ST9)

I think people are still skeptical to women in these kinds of roles. I feel like many times women have to prove themselves two times as hard as a man in order to be taken seriously into consideration. (ST6)

After having had a class about women composers, and having taken part in discussions and reflections, the analysis indicates that the students' answers got more expanded and reflective. Students became more aware of the pervasive influence of patriarchal structures that systematically oppress female artists and has played a significant role in diminishing the visibility of women. The analysis reveals that students also point to the practice of attributing women's compositions to male family members or husbands due to challenges in publishing under their own names. Another aspect is the prevailing dominance of men in both the composition and performance of classical music within public spaces.

Historically, women's contribution to the arts has often been overlooked due to patriarchal societal structures, where men's work was more valued and recognized. (...) leading to underrepresentation of female artists. Additionally, cultural stereotypes about the types of work women should be doing may have further marginalized their art in these spaces. (ST42)

Before and after participation in a VOW session, the analysis shows that the students' opinions about women composers are much the same, but there are traces of differences. Before VOW, the analysis indicates that the students emphasize the implications of a lack of visibility for women. In particular, it highlights the importance of equality and the discouragement faced by female artists. The students emphasize that the absence of women's voices helps to maintain the misconception that creative contributions are exclusively reserved for men. Furthermore, the data highlights that the underrepresentation of women in the arts has not only made valuable talent invisible, but also led to losses.

(...) that cultural invention and creativity has always been a thing only a man could do, which is of course wrong. But this may also prevent women nowadays to work in those areas. (ST8)

Women are in general given less opportunities than men (...) and thus this old-fashioned notion of women not being able to compose as well as men, or that in general that art created by men is better, still exists. (ST4)

After sessions in the VOW project, students highlight the necessity for achieving a diverse, balanced and inclusive representation of women in the arts. Furthermore, the analysis underscores the role women can play as role models for others, and the importance of finding someone that represents you.

It is always important to have women visible in culture (...) and have people who you look up to, so you believe you can be the same one day. So if there is no women visible in arts that you could look up to it might be harder for you to think that you can do it. Also one of the most important aspects of representation in my opinion is that it can help tell more than one side of the story. Someone's art is their point of view of the world. Making women more visible in culture will bring their point of view to the table. Giving a more diverse and representative art scene. (ST45)

Representation matters in shaping cultural perspectives and fostering inclusivity. The lack of women's visibility in European culture contributes to a skewed narrative that undervalues their contributions and achievements. This can reinforce gender stereotypes and biases, limit role models for younger generations, and obscure the diverse range of human experiences and voices. (ST 122)

The analysis reveals that the students emphasize the need for diverse representation in the arts, arguing that it should mirror society's diversity to ensure inclusivity. Absence of voices restricts artistic expression: Elevating visibility of women in the arts will therefore enrich artistic expression and fosters a deeper understanding of the world through varied lenses.

The students are also contemplating on why this repertoire should be performed today. In addition to emphasizing the importance of diversity, gender balance, having role models, and inspiration, the students also stress that there exists a whole new repertoire that until now has not been performed and that more visibility of female artists will inspire young girls.

The arts are important for people because they can feel that the art says something about themselves and the society, but if we only have male representation then half of the population will feel left out. Imagine how many interesting

voices that are out there that we don't know anything about! I want everyone to feel included in the world of classical music and in the arts in general. (ST 3)

In general, the students emphasize that the best functional society is a society that has diversity, and they stress that dead, white, male composers only represent a small part of all the voices of the world. And as ST3 mentions: there is a whole new repertoire out there that begs to be performed.

Theme two: Gender balance

The students express concern about the gender imbalance prevalent in both classical music and higher education curricula and syllabi. This suggests a stagnation in the inclusion of diverse perspectives in academic programs. The students note a dearth of literature and research on women composers within education programs. This deficiency not only limits students' exposure to the contributions of women composers but also reflects a broader scholarly neglect of their work.

The students highlight an awareness gap concerning women composers. Many people, even outside the music field, are familiar only with male composers from past centuries, revealing a broader societal ignorance of women's contributions to classical music. Overall, the analysis indicates a pressing need for higher education institutions to address the lack of representation of women composers in curricula and syllabi. It underscores the importance of actively promoting gender equity and inclusivity in music education.

In higher education it seems to me that the syllabus has not been updated in a long time. There seems to be less literature and less research on women composers, so then it is also lacking in the education programs. I think lack of representation is a mix of a lack of awareness and knowledge, but also the remnants of the patriarchy, where women were seen as less capable. Education should be relevant to the present day by incorporating modern views and current research but in music education it seems many schools stick with outdated "traditional" ways of teaching. If you ask someone who is not a musician about their knowledge of classical music, they might have heard of a couple of composers from

the 17th, 18th, or 19th century, so we have an awareness issue. As a female composer, I have experience that many people are surprised that female composers even exist at all. (ST3)

The majority believes it is crucial to attain gender balance in higher arts education, and it is important to show that cultural invention and creativity is not exclusively for the male part of the population. This is particularly significant for inspiring young women, challenging stereotypes, and ensuring equal opportunities for recognition. Overall, the underrepresentation of women is viewed as both an obstacle to diversity and a squandering of valuable artistic talent and new experiences. However, the analyses also reveal dissenting opinions.

(...) because it should be just as accessible for men and women to become renowned (not necessarily famous) for their works. At the same time, I somewhat disagree with the tendency to push women into playlists, festival line-ups etc. just for the sake of gender balance. I have already seen a lot of women heavily promoted on the basis of this idea, even though their works didn't seem like anything special. The special thing is that they were made by a woman. And this is not equality either. It's a form of positive discrimination. (ST5)

As seen above, some students caution against adopting superficial measures to achieve gender balance, emphasizing the importance of authentic recognition based on artistic merit rather than gender. At the same time, several students mention that they do not want women to be given *more* advantages than men, but the *same*: not to be represented just because of politics or diversity, but because it is deserving.

Theme three: the students' roles in change processes

The students advocate for a specific focus on highlighting the contributions of female artists. Students' proposals include organizing performances and workshops to actively promote the work of women in the arts as well as establishing scholarships for women to support and encourage their artistic work.

As a musician, I think that music is a very good possibility to reach people, because it touches and involves humans. Also because of that, it's very important to play the music of female composers. And of course, also because there are a lot of fantastic unknown pieces to a brighter public that should be more and more part of the self-evident canon. (ST24)

After having participated in VOW sessions, the students aim to boost the visibility of women composers through strategic use of social media. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok are especially highlighted as key channels to reach particularly young people. Overall, there is a consensus among respondents that social media can be a dynamic and effective tool in the mission to promote the visibility of women composers and address structural challenges in the field.

Almost everyone uses social media, especially to find yourself, compare with others and to search for inspiration. It would be nice to have another input for women like VOW in social media like posts about biographies of women artists, music and also information about their individual problems and how they lived with it. (ST39)

Maybe we don't want to admit it, but we spend a lot of our time on social media, part of our lives have moved there (...) (ST34)

The data shows that students acknowledge the need for a collective effort to enhance the visibility of women composers. Students highlight the importance of researching and performing works by women composers, while concurrently pointing out that one should choose pieces based on personal preference, regardless of the composer's gender. Nevertheless, the students emphasize that, during art events, the goal should be to include at least one piece by a woman composer.

The experience of learning from masterclasses in the VOW project has heightened students' awareness of gender differences. The students seem to be more inclined to incorporate the repertoire of women composers in future concerts and projects. They also highlight the possibility of creating a choral program or writing a master's thesis centered around women composers. Overall, there is clear enthusiasm for promoting music created by women composers. The core of these statements is also

the acknowledgment that VOW has significantly enhanced the students' awareness of their own repertoire. The students emphasize that they want to explore the existing repertoire and identify similar themes in their own environment. In addition, they want to promote networking and interdisciplinary connections. The students embrace their roles as agents of change and see the importance of including women composers as musicians today. Another interesting issue the students raise is why the change processes are so slow and that artistic recognition for women's work can be challenging even today. Several students mention that one of the problems of performing this repertoire today is finding material.

Theme four: Consequences of new knowledge and awareness in their own artistic activities

In assessing whether VOW has already influenced students' perspectives on performing works by women composers, or taking part in other artistic activities, the analysis reveals a positive impact. Students report active participation and involvement in concerts, projects, and symposia dedicated to women composers. Their involvement spans from attending concerts with works by women composers, performing repertoires by women composers, organizing musical theater, conducting choirs, to engaging with the topic through listening, reading, and writing.

I'm part of an ensemble organizing music theatre and playing operas of female composers! Next year, "Fête Galante" by Ethel Smyth will come on stage. Also, I made a whole program around female composers with a choir, I conducted and wrote my bachelor thesis on Lili Boulangers song cycle "Claireres dans le ciel." (ST24)

I became curious about what music existed beyond the well-known male composers and asked my professors to give me pieces by female composers (...)
(ST36)

Analysis indicates that many students have gained heightened awareness of gender imbalances in music, art, and society, leading to increased sensitivity in language use, addressing gender-related issues, and acknowledging the experiences of marginalized groups.

I have become much more aware of the gender imbalance in music, in the arts in general and in society in general. I “see” and “hear” things differently now. I am much more sensitive to my own use of language, and how I address these issues, and I have become much more aware of marginalized groups in general. (ST38)

Participation in the VOW project leads me to a more inclusive and diverse artistic practice. I gained a richer understanding of women’s contributions to classical music. And I found new themes and ideas for my own work, expanding my artistic range and creativity. (ST 122)

Several students highlight how VOW has fostered an open, collaborative learning environment that enhances awareness of gender imbalances and language sensitivity, enabling discussions among students, musicians, researchers, and practitioners across areas of expertise and personal reflection. Students also mention that VOW established a safe place (which they say is unusual at the university), where they can freely express themselves, express their gender, both intellectually and in performances.

Discussion of the results

The purpose of this study was to shed light on the students’ perspectives and understanding of women composers and gender balance in the realm of the arts. We also aimed to investigate how we can foster a more inclusive environment that nurtures women’s musical endeavor, the rightful presence of women in music production across historical, modern, and future landscapes. Additionally, we wanted to investigate the potential impact of the VOW project in shaping the students’ own repertoire and artistic endeavors.

Our result shows that, overall, the students highlight the positive impact of the VOW project. It successfully directs attention to increasing students’ awareness of women composers. Participants emphasize the importance of gender balance not only in cultural representations, but also within higher art education. However, the knowledge the students had about women composers was rated exceptionally low, indicating

a large gap between how important they perceived the topic to be and their level of knowledge. As indicated by the results, numerous students experienced an epiphany when they got involved with VOW, where they learned how much music by women composers actually exists. This knowledge gap stands out perhaps more prominently than in other art forms. It then becomes relevant to question the reasons behind this slow pace of change. Several students underscore outdated teaching plans, the gradual pace of curriculum transformation, and the absence of equal gender representation in general in the art world.

The result of the analysis indicates a heightened understanding among students regarding the significance of gender balance and inclusion. The students position themselves as agents of change. This underscores that VOW has not only enhanced theoretical awareness, but that it has also translated into practical application. Students now want to use their instrument—their voice—to be active performers and incorporate new repertoires. They express impatience and a keen desire for rapid change. Being part of a larger movement to rectify historical oversights and promote equity in the arts also provides them with a strong sense of purpose and satisfaction. This prompts a pertinent question: why had they not engaged in or performed music by women composers before VOW? In their responses, students mention encountering numerous practical obstacles, particularly acquiring scores and accessing performances that would allow them to listen, learn, and draw inspiration.

The absence of ready accessibility to music by women composers has resulted in limited or absent performances. Although a considerable amount of music by women composers has been published, a sizable portion of it remains challenging to obtain. Some compositions are not available for purchase and/or are privately held as in the case of all the works of the British composer Rebecca Clarke (1886—1979). Even when accessible through libraries and archives, this repertoire requires active discovery and retrieval. Consequently, our students in search of this music must possess a precise understanding of what to seek and where to find it.

Gender balance and the woman composer question

As the students often mention, throughout history, women have been marginalized, leading to insufficient representation. This can include everything from the education system to the world of sports, culture and work life (Nielsen & Davies, 1997; Nielsen & Rudberg, 1989). The invisibility of women has contributed to a lack of recognition, fostering gender stereotypes, discrimination, and marginalization. Particularly discriminatory social norms and gender stereotypes have consequently restricted women's freedom of action (Wong et al., 2022). The empirical data from our study further confirm this, where the students express concerns about the lack of women in decision-making and leading creative roles within the music sector, including limited representation as professional conductors or composers.

Our findings indicate that students are keen to work toward change, yet they acknowledge that the process is time-consuming and slow. Nevertheless, various researchers have tried to shed light on the sluggish pace both within curriculum transformation and societal changes in general (Ahmed, 2017; Fraser, 2020; Valian, 1999). Within feminist research, especially in feminist musicology, fundamental differences in power relations and deeply rooted cultural practices are investigated. These differences and practices are perceived as obstacles to both curriculum and societal change. According to Björck (2011), to empower women's voices, it is necessary to have an engaged audience willing to listen and provide opportunities to claim their rightful space.

An issue we have discussed with the students is the usage of the term *woman composer*. Within feminist musicology, the discussion of the term has highlighted the risk of marginalizing women composers and emphasizing *the other*. The term may also perpetuate the idea that women's music constitutes a separate category or genre, rather than being an integrated part of the larger musical landscape. This was also noted by one of the students, pointing out a form of positive discrimination by using such terms and promoting visibility. In her book "Gender and the Musical Canon" (1993, p. 7), Citron examined the danger of attributing innate traits to women, thereby undermining the significance of social

context and individual distinctions. This is consistent with Kirkegaard (2022) who discusses the exhibition in 1980 entitled “Kvinder komponerer” (“Women compose”), which aptly portrays the dilemma. The need for a dedicated exhibition on women composers in 1980 reflected deep, preconceived notions about gender and musical innovation. Even the very existence of the category woman composer was sufficiently unknown to demand special attention, while fascinating enough to attract an audience. The category was also sufficiently unconventional to warrant a narrative distinct from that of the *male composer*—an aspect left out of the discussion. Kirkegaard points to the danger of involuntarily contributing to the *othering* of women composers, which fails to integrate them into the cultural memory.

The facts remain: our understanding of historical women composers is insufficient, as corroborated by the data material. Consequently, any additional insights would contribute to addressing this gap. Furthermore, it is crucial for students to gain a deeper understanding of the role gender has played and continues to play and their own role and capacity to change cultural practices. It is still imperative to discuss the absence of women composers in curriculum (Wollenberg, 2023). Conversely, the goal for many would entail reaching a stage where the woman composer becomes so normalized that we can discuss composers without specifically referencing their gender. Alternatively, and perhaps more intriguingly, it involves moving past the binary gender concept that underlies a sizable portion of recent research. The challenge of how to address this dilemma has been extensively debated, not only within feminist musicology but also within other disciplines that focus on the oppressed or marginalized in society. Spivak introduced the concept of *strategic essentialism* (1996, pp. 204–5, 214) as an approach to deal with this complexity. It encompasses a political strategy in which internal differences within a group are temporarily set aside, prioritizing unity to achieve common political goals (Eide, 2016, p. 2). Within this framework, we suggest the term *strategic canonism*, which implies not a radical replacement of the classical music canon but rather a questioning of it (Melting et al., 2023). Another viewpoint could be the concept of the *invisible canon*, wherein individual performers and historians curate

their own personal canons, thereby bringing attention to ignored composers (Slater, 2022).

The challenge extends beyond the usage of the term woman composer. Instead, it lies in the persistent relegation of historical women composers to cultural obscurity. Despite their presence within academia and conservatories, it is often perceived as an esoteric and unfamiliar topic, detached from the broader narrative of music history. This fundamental issue significantly hinders the widespread dissemination of knowledge regarding women composers. Until we achieve genuine gender equality in the music industry, terms like woman composer may still be necessary to help level the playing field and give voice to under-represented artists.

Pedagogical implications and the learning environment

In the questionnaires, we did not ask specifically about the learning environment, however several students remarked, under “Additional comments”, that they appreciated the VOW project’s emphasis on creating a friendly atmosphere to discuss and learn together, and felt that it was a safe space. Ensuring a safe learning environment was one of our primary objectives throughout the sessions. When discussing a topic like gender, inevitably many thoughts and feelings come up, not only about women composers, but also the students’ own perceptions of gender and gender expressions. It was then of the utmost importance that all such utterances were met with respect, and that everyone perceived the classroom to be a safe place. The underlying historical context of this concept is aimed at safeguarding marginalized groups from infringements, dangers, and animosity while providing them with a secure environment. The concept of a safe space, often employed as a metaphor in educational contexts, underscores the significance of fostering an environment that prioritizes both respect and safety and is conducive to learning (Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019). Within feminist pedagogies, safe space is defined as space in which all voices are heard and dare to speak (Rönblom et al., 2020). In a classroom setting, we understood the concept as a place where the

classroom becomes a co-creative space in which everyone is part of a shared experience and learns from each other in mutual interaction and tentacular thinking practices (Branlat et al., 2022).

Edmondson (2018) focuses on the concept of psychological safety, emphasizing the importance of creating an environment where individuals feel free to express their authentic selves without fear of negative repercussions. We strongly feel that art can be a factor in creating a safe learning environment, where in the process of art making, one is aware of fellow students' feelings, an environment where one cultivates empathy as well as imagination and creativity. In the VOW project, this commitment extended beyond theoretical discussions and lectures to include performance classes as well. In the practical performance of songs, such as in masterclasses where participants perform songs for others, students find themselves in an exposed position. Performing songs composed by women, as opposed to canonical compositions like those of Schubert or Schumann, adds an extra layer of complexity. These works are usually unfamiliar, suggesting that performers have not encountered previous interpretations of the songs in either live concerts or recorded formats. This demands more from the students as they need to create their own interpretations. Additionally, the extra element of being *evaluated* by a foreign vocal professor introduces a somewhat more stressful environment. Therefore, establishing a sense of security becomes particularly crucial in this context.

The continuing education of agents of change

In sum: The findings accentuate the conservative nature of the classical music scene, emphasizing the importance of visibility and methodological interventions. The project is not only about performing music by women composers but also about how to perform and present this music to a wider audience. The students voice concerns about the prevalent gender imbalance in higher education curricula and syllabi and underscore the significance of achieving gender balance in the arts. Additionally, the data indicate that students recognize the imperative of a collective effort to enhance the visibility of women composers. These findings are reflected

in research on participation within the classical music profession (e.g. Scharff, 2015). And concurring with our results, Gustlin & Gustlin point out (2023) that the absence of women in the art world impacts future generations, since the students lack role models.

Projects such as VOW fit into the tradition of critical and feminist pedagogies and has an implication for curriculum transformation in higher education (Meling et al., 2023; Minnter et al., 2023). There is a need to teach and implement a more diverse curriculum, particularly considering that these students might pursue careers in the educational system and require positive role models. This entails revising curricula to encompass a more diverse range of composers, proactively seeking and promoting the works of women composers in concert programming and cultivating an inclusive environment where all contributions to the musical canon are recognized. Highlighting women composers is an essential step towards creating a more equitable, diverse, and inclusive musical landscape within higher education, encouraging a critical examination of why certain artists may have been overlooked. Higher music education has a duty to ensure that music is inclusive and accessible to all (Werner & Kuusi, 2023).

Students report active participation and involvement in events dedicated to women composers outside the classroom setting, and those findings indicate that educational projects that are directed towards change may have a more general impact on students' development as critical thinkers due to their broad performing activities beyond academia and society at large. Our hope is that this and similar projects will lead to changes in both the artistic world and a curriculum change in higher education.

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