



# BRING THE GLAD TIDINGS

## A GREAT HOST OF WOMEN COMPOSERS

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Celebrations of Women’s History Month at St Paul’s Episcopal Church, Burlingame, California drew their theme from Psalm 68.11b: ‘A great host of women bring the glad tidings’. On International Women’s Day (Sunday, 8 March), the choir premiered *A Great Host* by composer-in-virtual-residence, Patricia Van Ness, a mesmerizing aural depiction of a far-flung company of women joining together to sing for the world.

As I sheltered in San Francisco at the start of the Covid-19 outbreak in the United States, I felt uniquely held and strengthened by the music of this great host of women. I thought of Chiara Cozzolani (1602–76/78), cloistered at the Milanese convent of Santa Radegonda during the outbreaks of bubonic plague in northern Italy (1629 to 1631), and of Fanny Hensel (1805–47), strictly counselled by her father and brother not to perform publicly or publish her

compositions under her own name. Despite their isolation, they persisted to compose and to perform, to share their music without leaving their homes. I ordered some recording equipment, created a YouTube channel (details below), studied, practised and recorded with intense focus, and began to post stay-at-home videos of piano music by women composers, beginning with some favourites by Nadia Boulanger (1887–1979) and Fanny Hensel.

Throughout the Bible, one reads the poetry of women singing in response to good things: Miriam and her companions at the parting of the Red Sea

**Above:** Collage of women musicians (including Sarah MacDonald and Fanny Hensel) and clergy created as part of celebrations of Women’s History Month 2020 at St Paul’s Episcopal Church, Burlingame, California. Some portraits by Peter Garrison. Graphic design by Alejandro Magyaroff. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

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(Exodus 15.20); Deborah, Judge of Israel, following a victory for her people (Judges 5.1–31); Hannah at the birth of her first son (1 Samuel 2.1–10); Israelite women after David's defeat of the mighty Goliath (1 Samuel 18.6); and Mary at Gabriel's message (Luke 1.46–55). From a millennium after Luke's recording of Mary's Magnificat, beginning with the 12th-century chant of Hildegard of Bingen (CMQ June 2019), one may look at music manuscripts composed by women and hear their music. From the 17th-century Baroque masses and motets of Milanese nun Chiara Cozzolani, to the 19th-century German Romantic vocal and chamber music of Fanny Hensel, to the 20th-century French organ music of Jeanne Demessieux (1921–68), to creations of countless contemporary women composers, a great host of women have offered music to the world. Have you listened to their song?

As a young graduate student, I heard a performance of the *Te Deum* for organ of Jeanne Demessieux, exquisitely played in concert by Christopher Young at the Fisk organ of Downtown United Presbyterian Church, Rochester, New York. I was entranced by this music that unexpectedly awoke my soul. In discovering a picture of this legendary French women organist in a 1992 article by Karrin Ford in *The American Organist* magazine, I glimpsed dimly an image of my own self, for Demessieux was another young woman who was passionate about the organ, whose working-class family had selflessly supported the best musical training available, and who had died the very year I was born. Demessieux's music, and the story of her life inspired and sustained me through the vocational vacillations of the next 20 years of my life, including a pilgrimage to the 12th arrondissement of Paris to see the modest two-manual organ Demessieux played, hidden from sight in the balcony of the Église du Saint-Esprit.



Above: Jeanne Demessieux at Salle Pleyel concert hall, Paris (c.1946).



Above: *The Music Room of Fanny Hensel (née Mendelssohn)* by Julius Eduard Wilhelm Hellft (1849). Thaw Collection, Gift of Eugene Victor Thaw Art Foundation.

In 2018, a kind and talented choir member of St Paul, Burlingame, musicologist Jim Steichen, introduced me to the wedding organ music of Fanny Hensel. I was captivated by her music, which revealed to me the truth of the composer of the organ processional at Fanny's wedding. (Fanny's younger brother Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy never completed the promised processional in time for her 1829 wedding, due to a cabriolet accident, though in 1845 he reused memories of a sketch for the opening march of Sonata III.) In Fanny Hensel's *Das Jahr* for piano, again I found the musical voice of a woman that gave me life, learning a movement each month, through a challenging year as my mother's health suddenly declined. Though Fanny's extensive formal musical training did not include preparations to be a church organist, she incorporated chorales into the months of March and December and a Postlude, chorales that represent respectively Easter, Christmas, and the presence of the divine through the passing of each year. Fanny's final version of *Das Jahr* was not published until 2000, some 158 years after its composition. This musical calendar was very nearly lost to the world, since Fanny was counselled by her brother and father to remain invisible, to neither publish nor perform publicly – as appropriate for a woman of her upper-class standing, for whom music could only be an ornament, never a vocation. This counsel she followed, despite the urging of her supportive husband, the artist Wilhelm Hensel, until the last year of her short life when she began to publish her music. Meanwhile, several of her compositions had been published under Felix's name; according to an anecdote recorded in Queen Victoria's journal, Felix had to confess to the queen that her favourite Lied (*Italien* – 'Schöner und schöner schmückt') published under his name had been composed by his sister. Fanny funnelled her passion for music into private



**Far left:** Fanny Mendelssohn in the guise of St Cecilia. Pencil drawing by William Hensel, 1829. © Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Nationalgalerie.

**Left:** Portrait of Susan Jane Matthews (the author) by Peter Garrison, inspired by Wilhelm Hensel's portrait of Fanny Hensel (2020). Used by permission.

Sunday concerts ('Sonntagsmusiken') at the Hensel home in Berlin, concerts to which prominent European musicians came to hear the music of both siblings, and to be inspired by Fanny's performances as a pianist and as director of her own choral ensemble, the latter performing such works as her cantata *Lobgesang* ('Song of Praise'). Composed in 1831 for chorus, soprano and alto soloists and orchestra, the cantata *Lobgesang* was published for the first time in 2002. While Felix's later *Lobgesang* of 1840 is still frequently performed; Fanny's is not well known.

It has been a heartfelt joy to share the profound music of these two composers, to allow the musical voice of these two women from 20th-century France and 19th-century Germany to be heard in the 21st century. Their life stories form a continuum with those of women musicians today seeking vocations in the church, performance opportunities and publication. In the past year, I began more extensive research, to commission, to study, to practise, and to share more amazing music of women who have been overlooked by the canon of classical music, both in the church and in the world. I have found it increasingly surreal to just be discovering in 2020 exquisite music written by women in centuries past for the first time. As Jeanne Demessieux and Fanny Hensel first appeared to me, then followed Hildegard of Bingen, Chiara Cozzolani, Undine Smith Moore, Patricia Van Ness, Cecilia McDowall, Judith Weir, Eleanor Daley, Sarah MacDonald, Melissa Dunphy and Elizabeth Kimble. In Patricia Van Ness's evocative paraphrase of Psalm 68 for her anthem *A Great Host*, I am empowered to now see these women surround me as a 'mighty throng; a vast and jubilant chorus, a multitude: a thousand, and ten thousand more; a glorious flock; a far-flung company; a vast and jubilant chorus of women [who] bring the glad tidings!'

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf opined that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction'. While in 1918 and 2020 we celebrate a centennial of women's suffrage respectively in England and the United States, women had held the right to vote for only a decade as Woolf wrote from her room in Sussex. She reflected that by walking together with women of the past, later generations of women in some way could bring to life the fiction that had been silenced – hidden, ignored, lost, even never written. While the work of bringing to light music by women composers once invisible has just begun, I see a change in heart percolating in publications and programming, and in turn improved circumstances to inspire composition of music by current and future generations of women. Is the music of the great host of women truly heard through the choral music lists you create, the music you teach your choristers, the music you offer in concerts and weekly to your parish? May choristers see role models of women in music leadership in the church, including the most prestigious posts, as vocations open to both men and women, vocations to which each of them might aspire? Does your church welcome girl and women choristers to the choir stalls?

Dear musicians of this world, the music of the great host of women composers may live through you. Pause and listen to the new song of glad tidings this glorious flock may bring, the song this vast and jubilant chorus of women sings for you.

Visit [www.susanjanemattthews.com](http://www.susanjanemattthews.com) for links to her YouTube channel

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