

# Girl Choristers, Invisible Women, And Breaking Through the Inertia in the Music of the Episcopal Church (Part II)

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*Part II concludes Susan Jane Matthews' article from September, which due to its length and scope had to appear in two parts.*

— Editor

## ***Invisibility of Women Composers in Episcopal Choir Libraries***

As directors surveyed reflected on their choral music lists, I repeatedly read of a startled regret in an awareness, in most cases a very new awareness, that they had included only a very few women composers amidst the lengthy lists of music sung in a season. Jared Johnson, Canon for Music at Trinity Cathedral, Columbia, South Carolina, was a notable exception as he included choral repertoire by ten women composers over two seasons. I commend Lyn Loewi's article in the September issue of the *Journal* as a resource ("Women Anglican Composers"), Hildegard Publishing, Furore Verlag, who both specialize in publishing music by women, and a new three-volume anthology of sacred choral music by women composers found at [www.multitudeofvoices.co.uk/](http://www.multitudeofvoices.co.uk/). Yes, women have been composing as long as men have been composing for the church; against all odds there is an abundance of sacred choral music by women from the past and present, resources are proliferating quickly to make scores available, and countless individual women composers have compositions available online on their own websites. In a dramatic departure from the repertoire lists of past RSCMA summer training courses, seven of the nine 2019 courses included music by women composers, music that will be highlighted in the Fall RSCMA newsletter. There is a treasure of sacred choral works by women awaiting the musicians of the Episcopal Church.

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## ***The Voices of Chorister Alumni, the Young Musicians of the Episcopal Church***

Seven young musicians reflect on their experiences as choristers in the Episcopal Church, and the transformative impact of the presence and absence of seeing women in the roles of directors, organists, and composers.

Genevieve McGahey, alumna of the Washington National Cathedral Girls' Choir; Professional Soprano; [www.gensings.com/](http://www.gensings.com/).

*I think, probably like many women in many fields, I tended to focus on the fact that I was being given an opportunity to learn and perform at a high level (something that would have never happened without the incredible efforts of Bruce Neswick in establishing the girls' choir program at the National Cathedral and Mike McCarthy in continuing to develop and support it!) ... I will say very definitively that the lack of female role models when it came to conductors left me convinced that that was not a viable career path for me. I had many wonderful role models in my voice teachers, male and female, but the concept of exploring composition or conducting seemed completely foreign to me, even if there were parts of my personality and abilities that seemed like those pursuits might suit me very well.*

Lauren Bodenlos, alumna of St. Paul's Choir School for Boys and Girls, Burlingame, California, and Senior at Agnes Scott College, Decatur, Georgia, religious studies and gender studies major.

*One thing I remember from being a chorister was our first trip to Grace Cathedral, San Francisco... I remember seeing the choir of men and boys, and seeing all the male directors and feeling like I didn't belong—like I wasn't supposed to be there. I didn't understand why boys' choirs existed and why a cathedral especially would support a system that makes being up at the altar celebrating through music inaccessible to girls and women.*

*I didn't think that composition was a thing that women did when I was little. Seeing man's name after man's name on piece after piece worked to instill in me a deep sense of internalized misogyny. I don't remember singing many pieces by women growing up, but I do certainly remember singing Howells' "A Hymn for St. Cecilia" [text by Ursula Vaughan Williams]. I think of God as a feminine figure, and this piece gave a feminine face to holiness in a way that my tiny self really appreciated, though I could not articulate it at the time. Singing about someone named Cecilia, someone who may have sounded like me, or looked like a future me made me feel seen in music and in the church as a whole in ways that other pieces did not.*

Bryan Zaros, alumnus of Church of the Transfiguration, New York City, Associate Choirmaster of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York City.

*With the oldest men and boys choir in the United States, it would seem that Church of the Transfiguration, "Little Church around the corner," on 29th Street and 5th Avenue in New York, would hold onto this all-male tradition without change, but in the great wisdom of their current director of twenty years, Dr. Claudia Dumschat, a girls' choir began several years ago to great success. Being an alumnus of this choir as a boy chorister, head chorister, and then assistant choirmaster in my teenage years, I couldn't be any more proud than to see a girls' choir flourishing in this parish known for its venerable Men & Boys Choir.*

Joey Blundell, alumnus of St. Paul's Choir School, Burlingame, California, Senior at University of Southern California, computer engineering major.

*I think that women have had a tremendous impact on my choral education... the mentoring I have received has contributed*

to more than just choral success, but to my success in life thus far as a whole. These women [director and singer colleagues] taught me how to sing. But beyond that, interacting with them every week also taught me how to communicate with adults and to be a confident and driven young man. As a chorister, I found myself not necessarily looking up to the men in the choir, but to the women who sang the same voice part that I did. As I settled in as a countertenor, this trend continued.

I can personally reflect specifically on singing music written by Elizabeth Kimble. Singing a piece of music that has been sung for hundreds of years is really cool, but there's something very special about knowing the composer of a piece of music and being able to perform it with her. It was a fantastic opportunity to premiere a piece for a female composer, especially one that could set the groundwork for her future works. I can only hope that women continue to gain the recognition they deserve in the sphere of sacred repertoire.

Elizabeth Kimble, alumna of the Choir of St Anne's Episcopal Church, Annapolis, Maryland, composer of *Preces & Responses* featured at the 2019 Boston AAM Conference reading workshop; [www.elizabethkimblemusic.com](http://www.elizabethkimblemusic.com).

Growing up attending and then singing in church, I often felt that the music and liturgy were meant for other people besides me. I didn't connect to it or see how it was relevant to my own life or time. However, the first time I sang "Jesus Christ the Apple Tree" by Elizabeth Poston, I felt like I had found the music that was meant for me. I was around twelve years old, and never before had heard a piece in church before that spoke so directly to my life and my experiences. It was the first time a piece of art had expressed the emotions I hadn't been able to express myself. Even today I have a special place in my heart for that piece.

Katie Burk, alumnae of the Cathedral Choristers of Grace Episcopal Cathedral, Topeka, Kansas, compositions featured at the 2019 RSCM Gulf Coast summer training course, graduate student in organ at Indiana University.

*A huge majority of notable full-time cathedral or large parish organist/music director positions are held by men, so looking at the wider landscape of our profession, we as a church lack female role models in high-visibility positions.*

*It's time for more women to be hired to lead well-regarded church music programs or to be clinicians at events like the RSCM courses, both of which inspire so many girl choristers.*

*Excellent leaders inspire the people they lead; if more women could be seen and heard doing high-level work in Episcopal churches (or in settings such as RSCM courses), I think more girls might be empowered to continue into leadership roles in church music because they might better be able to imagine themselves in those roles.*

Maggie Burk, alumnae of the Cathedral Choristers of Grace Episcopal Cathedral, Topeka, Kansas, compositions featured at the 2019 RSCM Gulf Coast summer training course, graduate student in conducting at University of Michigan.

*I voraciously devoured CDs of the great British cathedral and collegiate choirs; a sound world developed in my head, and a love of music ministry developed in my heart. I remember quite vividly learning that, because of my assigned sex, I would not have been allowed to sing in those English choirs—and I absolutely could not fathom why the leaders of the Anglican musical/liturgical tradition would not consider me a valid contributor to its continuation. I vowed to live my life in a way that would open doors for young women, and that fire continues to burn in me today. Several programs with the most influence, social power, and musical clout still exclude girls, and I hope they thoughtfully consider their attachment to a tradition that tacitly symbolizes the systemic disempowerment of women in church music... Women are drastically underrepresented in the musical leadership of the Episcopal Church. Growing up at RSCM summer courses (which I love and continue to serve on staff for), I never experienced a female music director, and only twice did I ever sing for a female housemaster. In a world that is tacitly male, female representation is absolutely critical; girls need to SEE women in charge, leading worship as conductors, organists, and composers... This same principle of representation applies to all groups traditionally disenfranchised by establishments in power: people of color, LGBTQ+ people, etc. As a child, seeing someone who looks like you leading a room full of people is a powerful moment—the greater diversity of representation we can cultivate as a church, the healthier our future will be.*

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### **Breaking Through a Silencing Inertia to a Singing Movement**

It has been a joy to explore the tremendous offerings today for girl choristers throughout the Episcopal Church that have been founded and successfully nourished in the past thirty years, to correspond with the directors whose dedicated ministry have given voice to girls in the Episcopal Church, and to listen to the poignant insights and vision of chorister alumni, the young musicians of the Episcopal Church.

We have made heartening strides in offering first-rate training and opportunities to girl choristers in the Episcopal Church, with a few notable churches that have lagged behind in welcoming girls to a place in their choir stalls. However, the Episcopal Church has not broken through the inertia of a stained glass ceiling for the music of women. Professional women musicians are not yet fully seen to be worthy as equal partners with men in the musical leadership of the



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Episcopal Church. As Jeanne Demessieux and Fanny Hensel also received first-rate musical training as girls, the history of women who are not visible as church musicians and composers continues, and a cycle perpetuates in which girl choristers do not see women role models for themselves in these vocations. For those talented and highly-trained girl choristers who are called to a vocation in music, most find it in music communities outside the Episcopal Church as they do not see a place for them within the church's walls as professional women musicians.

At the 2019 AAM Conference in Boston, with sincere thanks to Richard Webster and Colin Lynch, there were many encouraging firsts for women, for us all: a choral reading session for the first time included at least fifty percent women composers, a provocative presentation on including choral music by women composers in Episcopal liturgies by Lyn Loewi received a standing ovation, and a woman may have attended the very first AAM reception for women. The Rev'd Erika Takacs, in her 4<sup>th</sup> of July sermon at the closing Eucharist of the conference addressed our call as musicians in the Episcopal Church, our call to break the inertia that silences women musicians: "God has called on us to be a movement, and God has called you to make this movement sing... of eternal life, abundant freedom, and the discovery of true joy. God is calling you to help us sing so that we may make this into a land of promise for all people, a nation dedicated to the proposition that all human beings were created equal and beloved." May our song truly move us to see and hear one another fully.

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My sincere thanks to all who generously contributed their voices to this article, and to Lyn Loewi for her companionship throughout the journey of this past year. My heartfelt gratitude to all musicians in the Episcopal Church who have passionately dedicated themselves to the training of young choristers, and for the community of the Choir School of St. Paul's, Burlingame, California.

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Since October 2005, Susan Jane Matthews has been Director of Music at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Burlingame, California, where she is organist, director of the Chancel Choir, and founding director of the St. Paul's Choir School for boys and girls (2007). She has directed the choir in two recordings, *Sweetly singing in the choir* (2014) and *Searching for stars, to be released for Christmas 2019*. She previously served as Director of Music at St. Michael's Episcopal Cathedral, Boise, Idaho, and as Principal Organist of Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, where she has recorded two solo organ CDs for the Gothic label. Dr. Matthews completed a Bachelor of Arts Phi Beta Kappa at Haverford College, and MM and DMA in organ at the Eastman School of Music. She has performed and presented choral and organ workshops at AAM Conferences and AGO Conventions and chapter programs, including several lecture recitals on the life and organ works of Jeanne Demessieux. She is on the Board of Directors of the RSCMA and has served as an assistant director at the Pacific Northwest RSCM training course, and as organist and junior girls headmaster at the RSCM training course at King's College in her hometown of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.



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