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The 150 Women Project - Holding Series

Title

Women Faculty in the Department of Music, 1915-1975

Permalink

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Publication Date

2023-12-18

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Bloch (R) with Clement and Hodgehead at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, 1927

Photo: Ernest Bloch; from [Ernest Bloch: Composer in Nature's Diversity](#), Nancy Steinberg et al, 2005/2018.)

When I first began to think about what the Department of Music could contribute to the 150W project the answer seemed straightforward. I thought I knew that the history of women in Berkeley's Department of Music was deep but not long—that the department had an excellent record of gender equity in the past 25-30 years, but had had no female faculty at all until the appointment of ethnomusicologist Bonnie C. Wade in 1975. There seemed to be little to say,

except perhaps to probe the disciplinary assumptions that had made it possible to build one of the top academic music departments in the country without the participation of female scholars or to document the microaggressions faced by female students—many of whom are now leading figures in the field—in the 1970s and 80s.

Hoping to have something to add to those all-too-familiar negative narratives, one Saturday in March I opened the massive Excel spreadsheet compiled by the 150W researchers, a comprehensive list of female faculty at the university compiled from information in the *University of California Register*, the equivalent of our current Academic Guide (or course catalogue) that was published annually through most of the twentieth century. The first impression was overwhelming. The list consists of thousands of entries, and a search for affiliations with Music yielded scores of names, including some women whose employment in the Department of Music appeared to have extended for decades. Apparently, the first female instructor in Music was Virginia Graham, who taught voice and harmony from 1915 through the mid-1920s, soon followed by Elizabeth S. Brown (1923-1935) and Marjorie Gear Petray, who began to teach piano lessons as a lecturer in 1932 and remained on the faculty until 1970.

That these names are unfamiliar is due in part to the tendency to value and commemorate musicians and scholars who publish or achieve international careers above those whose activities are more local or more focused on pedagogy. But our institutional amnesia is also the result of the power balance in the ways music has been taught and histories narrated. The evolution of Berkeley's music department is routinely recounted as a series of influential male “genius” figures: musicologist [Charles Seeger](#) (at Berkeley 1912-19), composer [Edward G. \(“Rogue”\) Stricklen](#) (1912-1949), conductor [Paul Steindorff](#) (1912-23), and composer [Ernest Bloch](#) (1940-52)... (It is often forgotten that Bloch's move to California in 1925 happened entirely thanks to

the persuasive efforts of two piano teachers, Ada Clement and Lillian Hodgehead, who [built the San Francisco Conservatory](#) from their modest piano studio.)

But in 1921, as in 2021, the teaching of music at the university level requires that students acquire a wide range of knowledge and practical skills, including the ability to play and sing and training in the technical principles and historical usages of melody and harmony. These foundational subjects were not taught by the charismatic “lions,” but instead mostly by lecturers and “assistants.” many of them officially employed not by the music department but by the University Extension (or, in a few cases, at the School of Education), and many of them women.



“Winnifred Howe and Grace Hodgehead discussing the Quart's Arts Ball, in costumes which may have been worn at the fiesta”, “Artists Will Frolic--in the Modern Manner”, San Francisco News, 5 February 1920. Source: Gala, 1920”; SFCM History Blog, 2011

The stories—and sometimes even the very existence—of these women are forgotten because the kind of labor they did isn’t valued enough and (perhaps as a result) we lack the vocabulary to describe and appreciate their work. In what follows I’ll offer brief sketches of three female faculty from the first half of the century: Winnifred B. Howe, Madi Bacon, and Marjorie Petray. There are many more stories like theirs waiting to be discovered, beginning from just a name and some persistent web surfing.

One surprise in the campus *Register* is the appearance of an

instructor who is listed with the rank of “Assistant Professor,” a good 30 years before the appointment of Bonnie Wade. **Winifred Bliss Howe (1904-1990)** was employed as an Assistant Professor of Harmony beginning in 1943. Like many of the other women on the music faculty around that time, Howe had graduated from Berkeley, with a B.A. in 1940 and an M.A. in 1941. Howe had studied composition in Paris with Nadia Boulanger (who famously taught much of the American compositional elite of the mid-century, including Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, and Elliott Carter). She had also studied piano with Lilian Hodgehead at the Conservatory, played a recital at the Greek Theater in 1924, and seems to have taken a musicological (or ethnomusicological) topic for her masters thesis, ““A Comparative Study of Selected Ballad Tune Variants of the Present Day.”

Howe also authored a textbook, *Elementary Harmony*, intended for use in correspondence courses, published by UC Extension in 1952. When employment with the university ended in 1958 she was still listed in the *Register* as Assistant Professor, and it is tempting to imagine that both her appointment to a ladder-rank position (highly unusual for a harmony instructor) and her failure to advance were connected to her intimate and often tortured relationship with the married Bloch, which has been described with sensitivity [by Klara Moricz](#).

Madi Bacon

Contemporary with Howe at Berkeley was the choral director **Madi Bacon (1906-2001)**, who is remembered as the founder of the San Francisco Boys Chorus. Daughter of a Chicago doctor and a Viennese countess, Bacon received a B.A. and M.A. from the University of Chicago and then taught at Roosevelt University (then Central YMCA College). When she was



offered the position of Director of Music for the UC Extension in 1946, she had already accepted (but not yet begun) a position as an Assistant Professor at the University of Chicago. Drawn to Berkeley both by her brother's residence in the Bay Area and by California's natural surroundings, Bacon (an avid mountaineer and early member of the Sierra Club) was surprised by the casual atmosphere she found at Berkeley. As she describes this transition in the [oral history](#) recorded in the mid-1980s,

I had a great many surprises that year. I was

shocked at the students' behavior, the dirty corduroys. Somehow at the University of Chicago, it seemed more as if the students were there to study, and the respect for knowledge and faculty members established an appropriate atmosphere... Cal seemed to spread out without a plan. Very beautiful trees and things, of course. I became aware of the 1849 pioneer heritage, so different from our older eastern heritage.

In the oral history interview, Bacon is articulate about the state of music instruction at Berkeley in the 40s, expressing pride in the contributions she made through her role at University Extension. She describes her successful efforts to acquire a building on Bancroft Way with practice rooms for students, the development of new courses for students not majoring in Music (including a basic theory course, offered to this day as Music 20), forging connections with the School of Education so students could be trained to teach in schools, and the expansion of

practical music-making opportunities in a department that she describes as focused mainly on “musicological studies.”

Bacon can be acerbic in her assessment of the department’s character before her arrival, noting at one point that “even composition was not recognized as a fit subject for a Ph.D. From my point of view, the ‘art’ of music, the creative stimulus and emotional expression were neglected in favor of the ‘science,’ the intellectual and analytical processes.” Bacon left Berkeley in 1959 to focus on the Boys Chorus and conducting work in San Francisco. In the oral history, she expresses some bitterness about the division that persisted between the practical orientation of the Extension Division and the more academic focus of the faculty in the music department. Elsewhere she comments on the difference between the remuneration she received and that of the man who replaced her as director of the Boys Chorus and reflects about Berkeley that “I don’t



Source: Marjorie Gear Petray; Find A Grave; Mountian View Cemetery

think that women have been particularly successful on this campus. ...at U.C. Berkeley, I was never given tenure. After eight years, I was still a lecturer.”

The woman with the longest history in the music department was pianist **Marjorie Gear Petray (1907-1971)**, a Berkeley native and Cal graduate ('27) who was hired as a lecturer in 1932 and continued in that role until her death in 1971. In 1928 Gear gave [the premiere performance of Ives’s First Violin Sonata](#) at

Henry Cowell’s New Music Society of California with violinist Dorothy Minty. A few years

later she went to Europe to study at Berlin's Hochschule für Musik with Richard Buhlig, but when she married in 1932 she relinquished the idea of becoming a concert pianist because (according to Robert Commanday's [appreciative sketch](#) of her career) it seemed incompatible with marriage and children. In 1958 she performed Bloch's Piano Quintet with the Griller Quartet for the dedication of the newly-built Hertz Hall. Teaching both piano and musicianship at Berkeley, Petray shaped the careers of many distinguished musicians, including pianist Deno Gianopoulos, cellist Nathan Schwartz, and composer David del Tredici. As Gianopoulos recalled in 2009, "she was terrific, ferocious in a way and so musical, with clarity to the thought. She was so good in laying out a piece. There was a rigor to the architecture, you became aware of how the piece was being built as she played it."

There were many other impressive and fascinating women associated with the department during this period. Among them are Berkeley graduates [Antonia Brico](#) ('23), the first woman to conduct the San Francisco Symphony and subject of two [documentary films](#), and the agricultural activist [Helen Hosmer](#) ('29), who majored in English and Philosophy but also studied piano seriously when she was at Cal. Cellist Margaret Avery Rowell (the subject of [an excellent oral history](#)) was both a Cal grad ('23) and a lecturer for several years. She was a member of the all-female Arion Trio, who played daily radio concerts on KGO and NBC between 1924 and 1934.

A decade later folk singer Malvina Reynolds ('35) graduated from Cal with degrees in Music and English; you can listen to the excellent podcast episode about Reynolds at Berkeley and her iconic song "Little Boxes" [here](#). And let's not forget May Benton Treat Morrison, the benefactor for whom the department's main classroom and office building is named. Although not a musician herself, Morrison, who graduated from Cal in 1878, had a distinguished career as

an advocate for women's suffrage, heading up the Association of Collegiate Alumnae (now the AAUW) from 1911 to 1913. In 1899 Morrison gave a lecture on "Coeducation Then and Now," in which, according to [the San Francisco Examiner](#), she "expressed gladness that under the charter by which the University of California was founded there can never be any limitation placed on the college education of women, and... hoped that the day was not far distant when women would be given a place in the faculty." As the examples of Howe, Bacon, Gear Petray, and others show, Morrison's hope was realized—but each of these women confronted severe limitations in their careers at Berkeley, earning less and enjoying far less freedom to choose what they taught than most of their male colleagues. And, as Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby has powerfully demonstrated in [her recent talk](#) on "gendered struggles" in the humanities, those gaps have not yet been closed. While we celebrate the achievements of these impressive women, we may also want to cultivate and express shock and anger at the persistence of male privilege and the continuing challenges that women face in academic life.

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Margaret Avery Rowell
MASTER TEACHER OF CELLISTS, AND HUMBLE STUDENT OF NATURE
With Introductions by
Irene Sharp,
Bonnie Hampton,
and Galen Rowell
An Interview Conducted by
Suzanne B. Riess
1982-1983
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