Composer Diversity Database, https://composerdiversity.com

Music Theory Examples by Women, https://musictheoryexamplesbywomen.com

After many years of having to source music by marginalized composers from libraries, biographies, reference books, and other print sources, music instructors now have at hand multiple online databases containing music by women, composers of color, queer composers, and others. Among these are the Composer Diversity Database and Music Theory Examples by Women websites.

The Composer Diversity Database, founded by composer Rob Deemer and developed primarily through crowdsourcing (and, to be fully transparent, on whose advisory council I serve), is the newer of the two databases. Initially begun to document the work of women composers, it now includes non-binary composers, LGBTQIA+ composers, and composers of color. As I write this review, the database contains about 3,800 entries, and new information is being added on a continual basis. Because the Composer Diversity Database is relatively new, its search functions and other aspects are somewhat limited; users can search for orchestral works, string quartets, and beginning piano works, but not, yet, for piano quartets, string trios, or piano and other instrumental works. However, these categories will be added, and the current offerings—which include musical theater, chorus, Pierrot ensemble, percussion ensemble, and various wind ensembles—enable users to identify works by composers for performance or study purposes.

The site’s landing page provides a search box and a set of filtering options. A search for living female composers’ operas resulted in a listing of some 570 items, including composers from the United States and those based elsewhere. The search results show composers’ names, locations, and the tags attached to their records. My search for living women’s operas, for example, revealed that Jennifer Jolley is US-based and has works for opera, orchestra, wind band, chorus, chamber ensemble, voice, electroacoustic and/or installation works, and young band. Each composer entry links directly to the composer’s own site, which opens in a new window. A search for non-binary composers with works for voice resulted in nine hits, one for Latinx composers of string quartets brought up ninety-one, and a search for American Indian composers who have written for band resulted in six.

Although the Composer Diversity Database identifies in what genres and for what media composers have composed, it does not include full works lists for the composers, an addition I hope to see as the project develops. It is great to know that, for example, black American composer Marian Harrison has works for orchestra, but it takes several clicks to Harrison’s own site and then within it to learn what those works are and when they were composed. It likewise takes a bit of additional searching to discover exactly what Elliot Yokum has composed for percussion ensemble, what forces are required, and when they composed those works. Nonetheless, the Composer Diversity Database provides an excellent first step for anyone wanting to broaden the spectrum of representation in their performances.
or teaching, and providing links to the composers’ websites allows users of the database to contact composers directly.

Music Theory Examples by Women was created by Molly Murdock and Ben Parsell, and, like the Composer Diversity Database, has been largely crowdsourced. Users can search the database by composer name, time period, or theoretical phenomenon. A search on Florence Price, for example, leads to a page with a short biography of Price, a brief bibliography, and a scan of her piano piece *The Goblin and the Mosquito*. No date is given for the work, but the page for the piece itself presents a low-resolution, printable scan of the score and options for “listen,” “related examples,” and “concepts covered.” *The Goblin and the Mosquito*, we learn from these options, can be used as an example of applied chords and secondary dominants, the minor key, modulation and tonicization, pedal tone, simple meter, and various basic triads. However, the “related examples” only link back to the same piece.

Selecting Ethel Smyth, the database provides a biography and bibliography as well as links to three of her pieces: “The March of the Women,” “Two Interlinked French Folk Songs,” and a string quartet. Of these, only “The March of the Women” is dated. For the string quartet, the database offers a printable scan of the score and the same options as for Price. “Concepts covered” include clef variety, fugue, and canon; “related examples,” again, just links back to Smyth’s other works.

In searching for Neapolitan chord examples, the database directed me to works by Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel (who is also listed, inconsistently, as Mendelssohn-Hensel), Amy Beach, Mél Bonis, and Louise Reichardt. The Beach selection is the composer’s Mazurka for violin and piano, op. 40, no. 3, mm. 1–12. The scan is not the best quality, but it is useable, and the “listen” option takes users to two different recordings, one on Spotify and one on YouTube. The database is, like the Composer Diversity Database, always growing, and it could definitely use more examples of recent works. The only example for minimalism is Ann Southam’s “Glass Houses No. 5,” and there is no score and no related examples. There are six examples for “transposing instruments,” but three of these come from one composer and two from another; two are from the same piece. Hildegard’s “Item de Virginibus” lists “ametric” as one of its “concepts covered,” but “ametric” as an example type is listed only under the category of “20th and 21st century” examples. Despite these and some other inconsistencies and oddities (such as biographies and bibliographies showing up twice on the same page), the Music Theory Examples by Women site offers a number of works by women that can easily be incorporated into any theory class. The site also contains additional resources for teaching and learning, including general-reader articles on women in music, suggestions for creating more diversity within the curriculum, and blog posts on music and gender by the site’s staff. As with the Composer Diversity Database, I hope that this site will continue to expand its offerings.

For performers and instructors of all levels, both the Composer Diversity Database and Music Theory Examples by Women offer immediately useful information and works for programming, analyzing, and teaching. I encourage users
to contribute to both sites in order to help them flourish and to aid others in diversifying their musical repertoires.

Kendra Preston Leonard

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The Gershwin Moment: Rhapsody in Blue & Concerto in F, St. Louis Symphony; Kirill Gerstein, piano; Storm Large, vocals; Gary Burton, vibraphone; David Robertson, conductor. S Myrios Classics, B0794SPYLJ, 2018, CD and MP3.

Russian-born American pianist Kirill Gerstein has taken the classical music world by storm in recent years. His scintillating technique, inquisitive and far-reaching musicianship, and electric performances of some of the most demanding works in the repertoire have earned him the praise of critics and audiences alike, along with the prestigious Gilmore Artist Award, an Avery Fisher Grant, and top prize at the Arthur Rubinstein Competition. Recruited to the Berklee College of Music by vibraphonist and jazz icon Gary Burton, Gerstein’s studies included jazz and improvisation in addition to his classical training.

His eighth and most recent album, The Gershwin Moment, is a curated collection of live performances featuring the songs and concert music of George Gershwin. Included on the disc are Gershwin’s two best-known works for piano and orchestra, his ubiquitous Rhapsody in Blue (in the original 1924 Jazz Band orchestration by Ferde Grofé), and the Concerto in F, both accompanied by conductor David Robertson and the St. Louis Symphony. As tags to these programmatic centerpieces, Gerstein performs three encores from the 7 Virtuoso Etudes after Gershwin by twentieth-century virtuoso Earl Wild. Rounding out the album are two nods to Gerstein’s time at Berklee: a duet with his long-time mentor Gary Burton on Oscar Levant’s hit song “Blame It on My Youth,” as well as a collaboration with singer Storm Large on Gershwin’s “Summertime.”

From the beginning of the recording, Gerstein’s flawless execution, rhythmic energy, and improvisatory nuance take center stage. Playful riffs, embellishments, and an extension of the central cadenza in the Rhapsody capture the listener’s imagination. His spirited and commanding approach to the piano seems largely well suited for Gershwin’s breakneck writing, and his playing displays an admirable variety of expressive textures and moods. Most of Gerstein’s improvisations also feel quite natural within the context of the work—a feat not often accomplished with this repertoire. On some occasions, however, Gerstein’s attacks seem too brittle and lacking in warmth, and a few embellishments detract from, rather than add to, Gershwin’s elegant melodic lines. David Robertson and the St. Louis Symphony expertly tailor their sound to Gerstein, and the tutti sections within the Rhapsody are rattled off not only with exuberance and authority but also with the clarity and transparency of an intimate chamber ensemble. For those used to