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Clara Boone's Scales of Justice

Based in Washington, Her Arsis Press Seeks Fair Play for Female Composers

By Gayle Worland Special to *The Washington Post*

All the dogged determination that would drive Clara Lyle Boone through the next four decades rose up in her that night in 1957, when she dined at New York City's Le Ruban Bleu in the company of Hans Heinsheimer, one of the sharpest minds in the music publishing business.

What if someone -- like herself -- founded a company to publish the neglected works of America's contemporary female composers, the wide-eyed young music teacher proposed. "Look, Clara," replied her mentor, who would soon be heading to Europe to scout out new operas for the Met, "nobody will buy music written by a woman."

The 20th-century grandniece of Daniel Boone then sat back in her chair and understood, perfectly, that it was her destiny to be a pioneer. In the next 17 years, Boone would teach school, compose music, work on John Kennedy's presidential campaign, run for Congress in Kentucky on a civil rights platform, help an African American neighbor manage his trucking company, and watch her pennies.

By 1974 she had saved enough to launch Arsis Press, the first publishing company dedicated to the chamber and sacred choral music of living female composers. Today there are close to 40 composers (including one man) listed in the eight-page Arsis Press catalogue. Not only a source of sheet music, Arsis -- the Italian word for "upbeat" -- is a testament to Boone's unwavering and resolute passion: to make women's music heard.

"In my time, it was believed that women did not write music, and if they did it wouldn't be music that anyone would listen to," the white-haired Boone, 69, explains in a delicate bluegrass drawl. Wearing sensible shoes and a neatly pressed A-line skirt, she sits ramrod straight on the piano bench in her Capitol Hill living room. "I was a rebel," she says. "I know that now."

"Clara is such a treasure," says Frances McKay, a Washington composer who has known Boone for 15 years. "She's given so much to allow women an opportunity that she didn't have."

Boone's girlish voice and measured, genteel speech belie a fiery spunk. She's been known to chew out concert programmers who refuse to feature music by women, and tried to convince the Justice Department that the male stranglehold on classical music performances was a violation of antitrust laws.

When she taught near the D.C. housing projects, she became a master at breaking up fights and counseling shattered lives. Now, in the summer, neighbors watch her pedal off to town on her Fuji mountain bike, wearing prim white gloves and a broad-brimmed straw hat. She bicycles everywhere in the winter, too, but wearing a bright yellow slicker.

"She's a steel magnolia," McKay says. Born "on the trail of the Lonesome Pine" in the Appalachian foothills of Kentucky, young Clara learned about women's exclusion from history when she discovered there were no Boone women -- only men -- listed in the family Bible. Boone's father was a banker, her mother a semi-professional singer, and all four children grew up with a piano nearby. Clara went east to Radcliffe, then to Harvard to study composition with Walter Piston. To get a fair hearing she published her first works under the male pseudonym Lyle de Bohun.

She still calls classical music "the last bastion of chauvinism." "Feminism has been very slow to hit some of the arts. Music has been in the rear guard in many respects," explains Elizabeth Vercoe, one of the first composers to be published by Arsis Press and now Boone's associate editor. Recent headlines contain one of the most blatant examples: Under pressure from the International Alliance for women in Music and feminist groups, the all-male Vienna Philharmonic voted only last month to allow women into its ranks.

Female composers, meanwhile, are still getting the silent treatment. When the Women's Philharmonic, a 15-year-old orchestra in Northern California, ran a survey last year of the nation's 23 top-budgeted orchestras, it found that of the 1,534 pieces of music they performed, only three were written by women.

To the detriment of both male and female composers, Beethoven refuses to roll over. "Publishers are reluctant to take on women composers because their scores don't rent as well as other works," particularly those by the "dead white men" of the standard Western repertoire, says Judy Patrick, the orchestra's executive director.

Simply getting published is not enough; unlike fledgling writers and painters, who communicate one-on-one with their audience, the composer must wait for a musical performance to transform her ideas into sound. Still, a lot has changed in the 23-year lifetime of Arsis Press, and even more since Clara Schumann wrote her first piano concerto.

"There is a tremendous increase in interest in the music of women composers, both contemporary and historical," says Judith Shatin, chair of the music school at the University of Virginia and a composer published by Arsis Press. "That interest has been fed by women's studies programs, greater access to higher education in music for women, and the presence of women as orchestra administrators and conductors."

Ellen Taaffe Zwilich and Shulamit Ran are not exactly household names, but in the past 14 years they became the first two women to win the Pulitzer Prize for music.

The Women's Philharmonic has compiled a database of 1,100 works by women and is resurrecting scores by Fanny Mendelssohn. A new generation of scholars is unearthing the musical works of women nearly lost to history; CDs of 12th-century abbess and composer Hildegard von Bingen's works refuse to drop from the charts.

Composer McKay, who was the lone woman in her graduate seminars of the 1960s, sees a hopeful trend among her young charges at the Levine School of Music: Three of her seven composition students are girls. When Boone first heard and offered to publish "The Listener," Anna Larson's setting of a Walter de la Mare poem for voice and piano, "I was a person who was very heavily involved in raising a family," recalls Larson, a Washington area composer. "What Clara did was recognize my ability before anyone else did. She gave me the dignity and recognition of being published.

"It's hard to exaggerate how much it means to make that connection with the outside world of publishers and agents," says Larson, who now frequently writes music for the theater and recently saw her *Dance for Orchestra* recorded for CD by the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra. "Composing is a very solitary process, it's very isolated, and it's very personal."

Boone takes a close interest in Arsis composers, attends performances of their works and promotes them in the performance world, Larson explains. "She helped me see myself as a professional, in both a spiritual sense and a practical sense."

Boone's job is not easy, and certainly not lucrative. New catalogues must be printed each season and sent to members of IAWM and the College Music Society. Between household chores and visits down the street to care for a neighbor with Parkinson's disease, Boone secures copyrights and negotiates contracts, hires printers and deals with her distributors. The royalty checks she writes on her kitchen table -- for the performance of works ranging from fantasies to fugues -- pay double the standard industry rate of 10 percent. Boone constantly auditions new compositions, and sends most of them back with a polite and detailed rejection.

Boone's selectivity and "wonderful taste" have earned Arsis Press "tremendous respect" in the performance field, says Catherine J. Pickar, an associate professor of music at George Washington University. "It's a very small press, but highly respected and discriminating," adds composer and pianist Anthony Stark, the programming director for Washington's Contemporary Music Forum. "It is very catholic in its public offerings."

Clara Boone, pioneer, can sometimes be "almost too assertive" in her efforts to get music by women performed, Stark confides. But then again, he adds, "she's an explorer."

"She's a free spirit," the late composer Harriet Bolz wrote on the 10th anniversary of Arsis Press, "with a lot of derring-do."

Boone rises from her seat at the piano to straighten a picture on the wall. The house is settling, she explains as she picks up a copy of Arsis sheet music from a bookshelf. She takes a meticulous pride in the fine paper, in the prize-winning cover artwork that she scouts out in galleries for every edition. "It's a way to make every woman's published music stand out," she explains.

But such printing is expensive. To make ends meet, Arsis Press now requires its composers to deliver scores that have been written on a computer and are ready for the printer, rather than scripted by hand. Boone's Olivetti typewriter is ceding administrative work to associate editor Vercoe's home computer in Boston. Several Arsis composers have

created a modest fund for advertising, and one day hope to add anthologies and recordings to the catalogue.

They have more competition these days -- other music presses dedicated to works by women have cropped up in the past decade, and mainstream publishers are now adding more female-written music to their catalogues, Stark says. "It's the small presses that have led the way."

Clara Boone, gentlewoman, takes no offense when composers move from her company to a larger publishing house. "If a door opens for them to have more exposure and better marketing, I say, 'Go for it,' " she explains. "Women's opportunities are infinitely greater than they were."

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