
Aine Ganly
Third-year Undergraduate Music (Major)
University of Guelph

Indiana University Press published Music and the Skillful Listener: American Women Compose the Natural World by Denise Von Glahn in 2013. This monograph explores the unique relationships between the natural world and nine North American, women, Western art music composers. Von Glahn analyzes over two-dozen diverse musical works with dates of publication ranging from the late 1800s up until the 1990s. Including the author’s acknowledgements, an introduction, ten chapters, a conclusion, and an index, this book is 397 pages long. Von Glahn organizes the ten chapters into three parts. Part I, “Nature as a Summer Home,” features composers Amy Beach, Marion Bauer, and Louise Talma. Part II, “Nature All Around Us,” examines works by Pauline Oliveros, Joan Tower, and Ellen Taaffe Zwilich. Part III, “Beyond the EPA and Earth Day,” studies Victoria Bond, Libby Larsen, and Emily Doolittle. All three sections include biographical information about the composers; a description of the social and historical context in which they composed; excerpts from respective scores; photographic images; and quotations from each composer herself. Von Glahn focuses her music analysis on the many ways the natural world has informed the aesthetic choices and musical identities of these American women. Through intimate examinations of these composers and their works, Von Glahn gives voice to these nine composers while touching on larger ideas surrounding the intersections of music,
nature, place, gender, oppression, environmental ethics, and American cultural identity. The intended audience for this interdisciplinary monograph is not limited to readers whose primary interest is music. It is suitable for anyone interested in what we might learn from how nine skillful listeners have understood nature.

In the introduction the author outlines her objectives. Immediately, Von Glahn quells some of the initial concerns readers may harbour when first picking up her monograph. She tactfully prefaces *Music and the Skillful Listener* by explaining that she does not claim any connection between women and nature based solely on biology. She explains that she adheres to the idea that the connection between women and the natural world is derived from socially and culturally constructed dualities and falsely polarized thinking. She thus sets her work apart from early ecofeminist literature that has been widely criticized by academic communities as problematic because of its dependence on essentialist views of gender and femininity. The author claims that gendered education and women’s conditioning in passivity and observation contributes to a heightened ecological consciousness.

That said, I would caution the reader against completely dismissing previous ecofeminist scholarship. Although subjected to just criticism, early ecofeminist publications such as Vandana Shiva’s *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1989) set the scene for scholars interested in the intersection of gender and the environment. Understanding the historical foundations of ecofeminism, the history of its criticism, and the directions in which current scholars are headed are not requirements for enjoying and understanding Von Glahn’s monograph. Still, some familiarity with these topics would enhance the experience of any reader approaching Von Glahn’s work. In particular, Greta Gaard’s “Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Replacing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism” and Hawkins and Ojeda’s “Gender and the Environment: Critical Traditions and New Challenges” offer foundational knowledge as well as exciting suggestions for further reading.

To return to Von Glahn’s introduction, she does clarify exceptionally well what readers should expect from *Music and the Skillful Listener*. She maintains that she will

---


not be working with one rigid definition of nature throughout her discussion because she does not believe there is one fixed, correct definition. She classifies “art music” as it is defined according to AmeriGrove (325). And most importantly she explains that her book is not a study of patriarchy or the nuances of gender based oppression. So what is it then? Von Glahn states that her goal is to provide an intimate and in depth analysis of how these women composed the natural world and to explore their relationships with nature. How did these composers understand nature? What are their hopes and concerns for the environment? Her goal is to give these nine North American women a voice in the musical narrative of America and its relationship to nature, a narrative in which the feminine perspective has been forgotten and overlooked.

By far the most thought-provoking section of her dense introduction are the pages in which Denise Von Glahn defends her decision to include only Caucasian, upper-middle-class women in her roster of composers. She explains that she initially wished to include Chinese-American composer Chen Yi and African-American composer Margaret Bonds. Yet, Von Glahn was concerned that she would be guilty of practicing tokenism by including Bonds. She frames her concerns regarding Chen Yi as follows:

The political and cultural turmoil that engulfed China in Chen Yi’s youth introduced a raft of new concerns that would have required more specific contextualizing than I was willing to devote to a single composer. In addition, the history and treatment of Chinese Americans in the United States, which would have had to have been discussed, deserved more space than I could give it. Altogether these concerns caused me to rethink the idea of including women from a range of ethnic groups beyond the one I was most interested in exploring (4).

I could easily devote this entire review to these three sentences from Von Glahn’s introduction. Von Glahn’s justification and personal reasons for not including racialized women in her roster of an otherwise diverse collection of composers raises many thoughts, feelings, and questions surrounding a number of issues. Indeed, consistently, throughout the book, I returned to these concerns. Because she explores one woman’s voice at a time, Von Glahn’s writing provokes questions surrounding much larger and broader themes beyond those necessarily tackled in her text. I will return to this reaction throughout my review. Overall, I argue this monograph is dense and the task of unpacking its contents is an exciting one for any thoughtful reader regardless of academic or musical background, or lack there of.

After providing context for the music of the women, Von Glahn spends some time with the history of women nature writers, after which readers are ready to embark
on Part One of Von Glahn’s journey. “Nature as a Summer Home” features composers Amy Beach, Marion Bauer, and Louise Talma. These three women, born between 1867 and 1906, all had the privilege of spending many summers at the famous MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire. This exclusive rural oasis provided a romantic and idyllic experience of nature for these women, an unmediated interaction with nature rare for upper middle-class women at the beginning of the twentieth century. Although the compositions examined in this chapter are diverse, they share romantic and religious properties in common, as well as a pre-Darwinian notion of nature (43). The composers focused on in this chapter reference the small and the beautiful. Von Glahn successfully shows how they anthropomorphized and transcribed with technical and artistic skill.

Part Two, “Nature All Around Us,” focuses on composers who composed after World War I—the war, incidentally, that interrupted the lives and careers of the three women discussed in part one. In the 1930’s a transformed and grieving America welcomed Pauline Oliveros, Joan Tower, and Ellen Taaffe Zwilich. These are three very successful and very different female artists, a reality dealt with carefully by Von Glahn. Collaboration with other artists as well as between nature and humans is a prominent theme in “Nature All Around Us.” As the title suggests, Von Glahn shows how these composers focus less on nature as an “other” outside of themselves. Instead, these women relate to nature intuitively as something of which they are a part and express their relationships with nature personally using diverse styles and methods of composition.

Part Three, “Beyond the EPA and Earth Day,” features three women composing in a time of environmental awareness and advocacy. Government involvement in environmental issues became increasingly common in the years following Victoria Bond’s birth in 1945 (208), the eldest of the three composers considered in this section. Ecofeminism, as well as terms like acoustic ecology and zoomusicology also emerge at this time. There is much variety between the works of Victoria Bond, Libby Larson, and Emily Doolittle that Von Glahn chooses to examine. Concepts of circles and cycles, learning from the earth and freedom are all themes Von Glahn touches upon in the lives and compositions of these women.

*Music and the Skillful Listener* suggests inspiring interdisciplinary directions for the field of musicology. Von Glahn’s monograph can be considered both an ecomusicological text and an intervention into the field of feminist musicology. Ecomusicology often strives to provide insight into the ways composers communicate with or react to nature. In many humanist disciplines, including musicology, the

---

feminine perspective has been commonly overlooked. This has perhaps led to limited connections with our culture’s relationship to the natural world (20). In *Music and the Skillful Listener*, Von Glahn ensures that the voices of these nine women now become part of the conversation.

Likewise, the field of feminist musicology is diverse and complex in its objectives, though sometimes the goal of feminist musicology is simply to make the work of talented women available and accessible. Denise Von Glahn has compiled a fascinating collection of over two-dozen diverse compositions by women and made it accessible to myriad readers. That said, as Von Glahn acknowledges, this book only considers the perspective of those who are educated, white, and upper-middle-class. The demographic she focuses on is one that has benefitted disproportionately from mainstream feminist movements, those that have historically excluded racialized and otherwise marginalized women. On page five of her introduction, Von Glahn writes:

I trust that future studies focusing on a variety of Americans will document the reach of nature experiences as they are understood by other marginalized groups: I have chosen one, the one to which I belong. My goal is to say something meaningful about a coherent group of composers who, heretofore, have not been investigated in relation to a shared topic, a topic that is important, to varying degrees, to each of them and all of us.

I am not unsympathetic to Von Glahn’s desire to study a specific cultural demographic for the sake of consistency and simplicity, nor am I insensitive to her desire to study the demographic with which she identifies. Unfortunately, considering the grave historical and present day implications of her decision to exclude all racialized women from a piece of feminist literature, I found her decision to be somewhat problematic.

I appreciate that Von Glahn decided to remove previously included racialized composers from her study out of respect for the significance of the cultural histories to which she could not devote adequate time and space. Unfortunately, by avoiding the complications of the historical and present day treatment and oppression of Chinese-
Americans by excluding Chen Yi, Von Glahn focuses solely on the perspective of women who’s racial identities are seemingly not burdened nor complicated by racism. Von Glahn did not merely miss an opportunity to provide readers with variety in the perspectives she presented, despite her intentions, excluding racially marginalized composers from her book perpetuates racist and exclusionary traditions that have long marred Western feminism.\(^8\)

I believe that Von Glahn possesses the skills that would have been necessary to weave in minoritized perspectives intelligently and sensitively. I find it unfortunate that she did not feel comfortable doing so. I would have loved to read her analysis of Chen Yi’s or Margaret Bond’s compositions. It also would have been exciting to see her suggest a more intersectional direction for the field of feminist musicology, for I feel embracing intersectionality will prove necessary if the field is to continue to evolve.\(^9\)

Furthermore, Von Glahn chose women from the ethnic group she was “most interested in exploring,” but failed to adequately discuss their ethnic identities. I found it odd that Von Glahn would have felt the need to discuss Chen Yi’s ethnic identity so thoroughly that she could not include her at all, yet never truly delves into the ways that whiteness affects the standpoints of the composers she did choose to study. Neglecting to adequately address the ways their white identities influence how they are “womaned” maintains the culture of normative whiteness that prevails in much musicological work.\(^10\) A sufficient exploration of this topic is regrettably beyond the scope of this review. This oversight was perhaps the most considerable shortcoming of Von Glahn’s otherwise astute monograph. Her discussion could have been improved by incorporating any number of scholars who work on whiteness.\(^11\)

\(^8\) Bell Hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. (Boston, MA.: South End Press, 1981.)


\(^10\) Roberta Hawkins, Diana Ojeda, “Gender and Environment: Critical Tradition and New Challenges,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29 (2011): 243. The panel discussion on intersectionality within this article is where I first encountered the term “womaned.” Audience member Sharlene Mollet uses the word when describing the many identities and markers that intersect with her gender to arrange her unique standpoint as a woman.

Needless to say, I found Denise Von Glahn’s approach to race and identity lacking. That said, despite this, *Music and the Skillful Listener* is beautifully written, clearly organized, and accessible. Its interdisciplinary character and specific subject matter allow for Von Glahn to examine her materials in intimate detail and provide an in-depth analysis of the works in question. The connections Von Glahn draws are sophisticated but well within reach of students and academics alike. Her analysis is thought-provoking and her choice of musical material diverse. *Music and the Skillful Listener: American Women Compose Nature* remains a stunning and unique contribution to the field of musicology. It is a much overdue lesson in listening carefully and deeply to the world around us. I hope that Von Glahn’s work will inspire future authors to, in von Glahn’s words, “nuance our understanding of how nature and music and humanity interact” (5).

**For Further Reading:**


