

*Women Composers and Music Technology in the United States: Crossing the Line*, by Elizabeth Hinkle-Turner

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**Abstract:**

This article is a review of "*Women Composers and Music Technology in the United States: Crossing the Line*" by Elizabeth Hinkle-Turner.

**Keywords:** Book Review | Music | Women composers | Technology

**Article:**

***Women Composers and Music Technology in the United States: Crossing the Line*. By Elizabeth Hinkle-Turner. Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2006. 301 pp., including discography, bibliography, list of Web sites with access to recorded music, and index of proper names.**

On my computer desktop is a photo of the faculty and staff of the famous Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center, circa 1970. The six individuals posing for the camera are arrayed in a kind of hierarchy: Milton Babbitt and Otto Luening occupy the foreground, with Vladimir Ussachevsky just behind them, and Mario Davidovsky occupies the middle ground. In the background, right of center, two young women stand close together, looking formal and modest despite the long hair and short skirts typical of the era. The women are Alice Shields and Pril Smiley, who worked in the center as teachers, technicians, experimenters, and collaborators; during the center's most productive period they were two of the four primary instructors in electronic music. Both are prolific, accomplished, award-winning composers of electronic music, yet they never received the status and pay their work at the center warranted, and they are seldom mentioned in the standard narratives of the history of electronic music in the United States, as

Joel Chadabe's *Electric Sound* bears witness.<sup>1</sup> This neglect is hardly surprising: women have worked "in the background" for a common goal in so very many roles and fields, yet for historical and cultural reasons men have commanded the "foreground" and are thus the subjects of history. Elizabeth Hinkle-Turner's greatest achievement in *Women Composers and Music Technology in the United States: Crossing the Line* is to shift background and foreground so that women like Smiley and Shields become the historical subjects and their male colleagues play supporting roles. This perspective shift makes Hinkle-Turner's book more than a compensatory history, adding women to a male narrative; rather, it is a *women's narrative*, attending to the ways that the particularities of these composers' lives as gendered beings intertwine with their careers, creativity, and community. The volume is the first of a series on women and electroacoustic music Hinkle-Turner plans to write for Ashgate; future volumes will address women in Europe, Australasia, and Latin America.

No one is better qualified to write such a book: a composer herself, Hinkle-Turner is also a university computing professional and longtime advocate of women in music. These conditions give Hinkle-Turner not only the technical savvy and broad knowledge of the field required for this type of study but also awareness of and access to the composers who are the subjects of her research. She draws primarily on her own interviews with living composers and her analyses of electronic music for much of the material of the book. But she also brings to the table her feminist sensibilities and knowledge of feminist musicology, which is particularly evident in the book's introduction.

Of the six chapters that follow the introduction, three are devoted to women composers in academic settings (chapters 2–4), while two are more topical, concerning women and technology in popular music (chapter 5) and women in multimedia (chapter 6); the final chapter provides a trenchant assessment of the current status of women in electroacoustic music. This concluding chapter is the most theoretical of the book, for here Hinkle-Turner grapples with the reality that, after seventy or so years of breaking down barriers, forming alliances, networking, mentoring, and achieving success, women composers of electronic music find that younger generations of women are not following in their footsteps. Rather, the numbers of female students in university electronic music composition programs have actually decreased in recent years (247), and their female predecessors doubt their own influence as role models (253). Hinkle-Turner airs several theories to explain this phenomenon, including cultural constructions of femininity, the "aggressive jargon" of the computer world, and U.S. women's putative risk aversion, conditioned to some degree by the fear of gender-based violence. I would add to these possibilities insights from Kip Pegley's work on girls in music technology courses.<sup>2</sup> According to Pegley's study, girls' interest in music technology tended to "fly below the radar" of their male instructors, which raises the question of how these girls might deploy their technology interests in the future, whether in "official" (visible) institutions or in "underground" (invisible) noninstitutional settings. Moreover, as Hinkle-Turner discusses at the beginning of chapter 3, "A Generation of Growth and Influence," the changing social practices and sense of possibility

sparked by "second-wave" feminism in the 1970s had considerable impact on the education and careers of women composers (44–45). Her documentary evidence would seem to support a theory that the cultural neglect of feminism—the idea that we are all equal now, that feminism is obsolete rather than a vital movement that requires care and feeding—could be a major contributor to the recent retrenchment of gender equity in the composition programs of many U.S. universities. The conclusion of the book, then, left me rather sad in spite of the previous chapters of women's triumphs; these issues extend far beyond the scope of this particular book.

Hinkle-Turner views her book as a starting place for further research on women and music technology, and for this reason, perhaps, the earlier chapters on academic women composers are particularly data-heavy. There is a wealth of information here, organized chronologically to show its relationship to the "standard" (all-male) narrative of the development of electronic music. Composers' biographies situate themselves within their chronological contexts, and most are followed by analyses of one or more of the composers' works, some of which appear to be listening-based descriptions, while others address the technical means the composers used. Many of the bios are fascinating, many of the composers were new to me, and Hinkle-Turner's attention to female sound engineers, founders of electronic music studios (Jean Eichelberger Ivey at Peabody, 1969, and Emma Lou Diemer at UC Santa Barbara), and advocates of electronic music education add depth to narrative. It is astonishing (not to say annoying) that so many women could be so near the bleeding edge of music technology and yet be so diminished in historical accounts: not only did Bebe Barron (*Forbidden Planet*, 1956) and Johanna Beyer (*Music of the Spheres*, 1938) create electroacoustic music "firsts," but Hinkle-Turner attributes the very *idea* of electronic music to a woman, Lady Ada Lovelace (1815–52).

Several patterns recur among these composers' works, including the incorporation of each composer's own voice into electronic music composition, (e.g., Alice Shields, Jean Ivey, and Christine Baczewska), attention to the natural world (e.g., Maggi Payne, Annea Lockwood), and *hommage*—or, I guess, *femmage*—in the form of using text or music by women or stories about them as a point of departure (e.g., Eve Beglarian, Kitty Brazelton, Linda Dusman). Hinkle-Turner makes no claim that these patterns constitute anything resembling a "feminine" style, and there are certainly enough counterexamples to disprove such a claim, yet there are patterns.

The variety of these composers' experiences is so great that it seems difficult to generalize, à la Virginia Woolf, what conditions must obtain to allow a woman to become an electroacoustic music composer. One significant theme that emerges in these chapters is the importance of mentoring but the relative insignificance of the mentor's gender: while Pauline Oliveros, for example, has encouraged and inspired her successors, Charles Amirkhanian also mentored and supported women in electronic music, as his production of *New Music for Electronic and Recorded Media* (or, as I like to call it, "the orange album," 1977) attests. Hinkle-Turner takes care to draw the connections among her subjects so that the networks underpinning women's success in electronic music emerge. On the other hand, intrepid spirits like Laurie Spiegel, a prolific developer of music software and hardware, have been perfectly happy to go it alone,

have not had much use for advocacy, and seem to believe that women should just stop carping and put their shoulders to the wheel (50). Hinkle-Turner's account of Spiegel's extensive work is one of the longest and most intriguing of the one hundred plus composers she discusses; other extended discussions center on the lives and works of Joan Miller (b. 1931), Pauline Oliveros, Daria Semegen, Eve Beglarian, and Priscilla McLean. Some of the accounts, however, go by too fast (a predictable byproduct of covering so much material in so few pages), which makes portions of the book feel a little more like a reference work than a historical narrative.

In chapters 5 and 6, however, where she addresses fewer subjects, Hinkle-Turner lingers longer on the individual artists and their works, and these chapters make engaging reading. Chapter 6, "Finding Their *Visual* Voice: Composers Explore Multimedia Technology," is particularly effective in its topical organization, including women composers' use of video to document their personal stories or tell about their own history as an artist. The narratives in this chapter are compelling, especially Hinkle-Turner's account of her own multimedia series *Full Circle* (1994–97), which chronicles her journey as a cancer patient and survivor. Chapter 5, "In the Spotlight: Role Models Rise in the Mainstream," also draws on ideas from a broader range of musical, theoretical, and technological sources to form satisfying discussions, particularly about women engaged in film music composition and audio engineering. Hinkle-Turner's sketch of Laurie Anderson is especially valuable for its handling of the various ambiguities invoked by Anderson's education, career, and attitudes and what those ambiguities might mean for other women who may wish to perform without being specularized or use technology to liberate themselves from instrumental technique (I refer to Anderson's famous vocal and visual androgyny and her adaptation of the violin bow). On the other hand, the section about Wendy Carlos, while informative and interesting, seemed a little disingenuous in its failure to acknowledge that as "a precocious child [who] composed [a trio] at 10 and at 14 won a Westinghouse Science grant for building a small computer," Wendy was still Walter (214). Perhaps this information was suppressed for Carlos's benefit, but it makes a difference if we are going to talk about the relative social environments of boys and girls and how they affect access to music technology.

My only real complaint about this book pertains to Ashgate's production values. While the extensive bibliography, discography, and list of Web sites offering women's electroacoustic music are terrific resources I will use again and again, so many of the book's discussions, especially the analyses, could have been helped along by some illustrations. There is not one photograph, chart, or musical example in the entire book, and sometimes the unbroken stream of text cries out for a little multimedia. Better copyediting would have been nice, too. (When did some publishers stop doing this?)

Notwithstanding Elizabeth Hinkle-Turner's disclaimer that the book is not comprehensive (what book about an ongoing phenomenon *can* be?), this is the most complete and detailed account of its subject matter to date. Anyone who teaches, studies, or has an interest in women in music,

modern music, or music technology should purchase this book, first to read, then to keep on hand as a reference.

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Elizabeth L. Keathley is an associate professor of historical musicology at the School of Music, University of North Carolina, Greensboro. Her research addresses issues raised by musical modernism, gender, ethnicity, and other forms of "difference."

**Footnotes**

1. Joel Chadabe, *Electric Sound: The Past and Promise of Electronic Music* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997).
2. Karen Pegley, "Gender, Voice, and Place: Issue of Negotiation in a 'Technology in Music' Program," in *Music and Gender*, ed. Pirkko Moisala and Beverley Diamond (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).