

# "UNA VOCE FUORI DEL CORO – UNTUNEFUL VOICES"<sup>214</sup>

By Patricia Adkins Chiti<sup>215</sup>

In 1998, a study entitled "Le Donne nelle Arti, nella Cultura, nell'Industria Culturale e nell'Indotto" (Women in the Arts, Culture, the Culture Industries and in Supporting and Service Industries) was commissioned by the CNPO (Italian National Commission for Equal Opportunities, President's Privy Council) and undertaken by the CENSIS Foundation. While it does not pretend to have cracked the mystery of the number of women working in the arts and culture, it is an interesting survey of 250 women artists, managers, decision-makers and their perception of their working environment and conditions for work. The following article reflects upon the results of this survey and its political consequences.

## 1. Opinion Streams: A Review of Results from the CENSIS Survey

CENSIS carried out 250 indepth interviews<sup>216</sup> with a sample of women representing various sectors and under a framework of 296 different professions<sup>217</sup> identified for the study. Their investigation lasted for two years and was undertaken throughout Italy (from North to South including the Islands). The women interviewed were divided into four distinct age groups:

- Up to 29 years of age. This group included very young girls working in the circus, in travelling entertainment, in specialist schools (dance, music) and younger women already employed in the sectors under study. These were subsequently divided into unmarried, married (or living with a companion), divorced or separated, with and without children.
- From 30 to 39 years of age. This group of women are already professionally involved on a full or part time basis and, again, distinctions were made between single and married, with and without children.
- From 40 – 49 years of age. This group represents those who have "carried on" with an artistic profession or who are firmly established in the public and private sectors of cultural administration. Again the above marital distinctions were made.
- From 50 and over – even up to 85 years of age. These women represent those who have stayed the course and, it must also be added, some of the most creative of women in the performing and visual arts. Most were free of child care and parental care – many were single (if they had ever married or had companions).

---

<sup>214</sup> This text was originally written in English.

<sup>215</sup> Patricia Adkins Chiti (Fiuggi) is a musician and musicologist, President of the Fondazione Donne in Musica, Italian State Commissioner for Equality Opportunities within the President's Privy Council and is a consultant to several ministries for cultural policies for women.

<sup>216</sup> Over 1,500 women participated in the survey, while 250 participated in more extensive interviews.

<sup>217</sup> List of professions was generated by cross-checking principle sectors: audiovisual, music, theatre, dance, circus and travelling entertainment, visual arts (which includes fashion, photography and design), heritage, conservation (libraries, museums, galleries, archives including those belonging to the State and to the public administration) with professional roles/activity: creative, executive, directional, technical, commercial, marketing and publicity, public relations and promotion, independent production, organisation, consultant, study and research, crafts.

In general, the Report indicated that 60% of all women had difficulty in combining private life with public and professional activities, 35% of all women said that they had always tended to undervalue their capacities and abilities, and those under 40 also declared that their personal professional and artistic objectives were not always clear to them. Only 17% seemed to have had any problems with their families and only 18% believed that men in decisional making positions hindered their advancement. (This general belief, however, changed when the women were creators and not working in the public sector as, for example, administrators). Below are some more specific results.

### *Income Levels*

54% of those interviewed had no other occupation outside that which they declared; 17,2% had an income of less than Lit. 10 million per year (well below the national poverty level)<sup>218</sup> and a further 23,3% had an income of less than Lit. 20 millions per annum. More than 44% define themselves as having a "low income". 90% of the women interviewed earned less than Lit. 40 million per annum. This data was confirmed by similar, yet partial studies, carried out by some trade unions and professional guilds. 62% of all interviewed do not foresee a noticeable change in their financial status in the near future.

### *Perceptions of Work Environment*

93,8% declared themselves highly satisfied with their work, 85% are happy with the amount of "creative space" that they occupy and 81,8% underline their satisfaction with the interpersonal relationships possible in their field. They consider themselves "successful" because they are able to work and create at a certain level; they enjoy their freedom of movement. They deplore the low level of their earnings and the "fragility" of their social security and welfare.

84% consider themselves "successful" and 42,2% "fairly successful and happy". The use of the word "success" is linked to personal growth rather than to the acquisition of outward symbols and material goods. Work tends to be lived as a form of therapy, to give a "voice" to intimate aspirations. Social and public aspects do not appear to be important, work is a means of "expressing and realizing oneself" for 70%, while 20% consider this the "sense for their lives" and only 5,6% believe that work is a means of acquiring a role in society.

52,7% complained about the laws of supply and demand which appear to dominate the work market, 39,8% complained about the brutality of the auditions necessary in some areas ("cattle calls"). Older women, (over 45 years of age) especially those working in theatre, cinema and publicity and in those fields at close contact with the public (public relations, promotional work) spoke of the ongoing male interest in under thirty year olds and complained about the lack of "suitable roles" (in theatre) or "acceptance" (in other fields) for older women. This is one of the reasons behind the growth of women's theatre festivals and circuits, alternative festivals for music and the large number of visual artist cooperatives.

Nearly all interviewees in the CNPO/CENSIS survey underlined the lack of "equality" for women entering the work market. They pointed to the absence of women in adjudicating commissions, prize and honour committees, and boards of directors, audition panels. All complained that this inevitably leads to forms of marginalization, exclusion and compromise.

---

<sup>218</sup> National Poverty Level is considered to be less than Lit. 12 millions gross per year. In some fields, this level is raised to Lit. 18 millions gross. (The tax paid on the foregoing sums would be about 20%, plus most taxpayers would also be paying some kind of insurance contribution).

### *Policies*

When interviewed about the equality of opportunity, or lack of, 28% declared to have heard of the problem for more than 20 years and nearly 35,6% wished to see a greater state and institutional interest in this problem. 41%, on the other hand, declared, "equal opportunities were not an argument that turned up in their own conversations". Women working in state financed fields (heritage, conservation, formation, education) were aware of Equal Opportunity Commissions because most public administrations have representation in one commission or another. Women working in music, theatre and visual arts are all aware of the lobby carried forward on their behalf by a number of specific institutions: Foundations, professional guilds, cultural associations and the CNPO itself.

73,2% declared that they had no personal contact with an Equal Opportunity Commission (although they had heard about the work carried out). 85% could not qualify the terms "mainstreaming" and "empowerment" although all wished to enforce networks between women working in the various sectors of the arts and culture and the culture industries.

### *Public Recognition for Female Creators*

When women composers, playwrights, artists, designers, scenic designers and other "creators" were interviewed they complained that their work is subject to "quality control". Within those art and culture fields where artistic directors or single administrators define 'quality', one can see that only a minority of women achieve their objectives. "Promotion" or "career progress", "commissions", "performances", "programming" depend upon that magic word – "quality". When a woman is never considered for any of the above one hears that a "*woman would have been invited if they had had the same qualities as a man*". Interesting when one remembers that "quality" is more often defined by men than by women.

### *Women in Decision-Making Positions*

The research results showed that there are many more women in decision-making positions in those areas and fields of the arts and culture directly funded and administered by the State as well as in the field of training and education (where there is an almost complete feminisation in some areas). Women can be found as middle level directors and executives in professional organisations, cultural institutions, theatres, opera houses, academies, conservatories and in specialist training centres. There are more women decision makers in those sectors of culture and the culture industries regarding heritage and conservation (libraries, museums, galleries). Unfortunately, top-level women directors and administrators are still a minority within the performing arts (theatres, cinema) and the media sectors.<sup>219</sup>

Although there is a strong presence of feminisation in state schools, women are very rarely heads of teaching establishments (or the presidents). At the time of writing Italy has only 20 female directors of conservatories, academies and university departments.

---

<sup>219</sup> There are many opinions about "why" women are not in top or decision making positions. One strongly held Metropolitan myth is that men work harder politically to find the right networks, pals and clout, than women do. Men want "Potere = Power" while women want "Potere = to be able to do things". A recent ISTAT report tells us that Italian women work longer days than any other women in the European Community and that they spend more time on "caring duties" than their sisters in the North and Centre of Europe. The same report also tells us that many women at the tops of their professions (from law to academia, from fashion to commerce) are (a) 40 and 50 plus, (b) single, divorced or separated and (c) have few holidays and free time.

The National Academy of Dance (with a woman president and 85% share of women teachers) is responsible for granting professional teaching diplomas and certificates (recognised by the State). The Academy estimates that 98% of the private dance schools are owned and run by women. However, only 3 opera houses have a woman dance director, and the number of women choreographers (in any one season) is roughly 1 to 30.

A cursory study of cultural and banking foundations (including the new Foundations set up to run the state opera houses and orchestras) in Italy shows us that there are few women on the boards of directors and even fewer as presidents of foundations. Sufficient to say that only two women sit on the boards of the Italian opera foundations. Since the presidents of the foundations and the directors of the cultural associations are ultimately responsible for the creation, production and promotion of art and culture, it should not come as a surprise to learn that only four full-length operas by women have been produced in state opera houses in the last 50 years.

### *Future Action*

All those interviewed, or contacted as specialists within their own field, were invited to set out a priority list of necessities essential for their professional and artistic work. The majority seem more concerned with their professional training and "know how" than with problems related to their personal lives, for example the question of maternity benefits. One reason for the latter is because there has been an increase in the number of women around their mid 30s who are marrying and therefore have a stable income and network of family support to fall back on. One woman interviewed: she is in her forties, has 4 children, is married to another musician, commutes between Italy, Israel and the United States and maintains that she "never thought of stopping her career as a composer and "in any case, my husband takes his share of the caring".

When invited to formulate a series of proposals to resolve some of the daily problems faced by women artists, technicians and professionals, all without exception underlined the necessity to find ways of enforcing contractual power, possibilities for part time employment and better negotiations for free-lance work.

## **2. Survey Results and Public Debate**

When the CNPO-CENSIS report was presented to the public, the national press and the media (including state and commercial TV channels) all came out with headlines such as "Cinderellas of the World of Culture", "Untuneful Voices" and even "Women Artists – poor, single and without power". Italian women artists were described as being "numerous" and "their work is the fundamental element of their lives, even if this is a negative influence on their personal lives and family ties".

The newspaper "La Repubblica" even published a vignette: "33,8% of all women working in Italy have something to do with the world of arts, culture and cultural industries. Of these 55% are unmarried, separated or divorced. Only 2,9% of all women are running an academic institution, and 22% of all women work in the cultural industries at a medium to low level. 13,2% of all heads of cultural institutions (private and public ) are women and so are 5,7% of all cultural councillors (in regions, provinces and towns). 3,5% of all gallery and museum general directors are women". Not all of this data was collected via the CNPO-CENSIS study.

Following the release of the CNPO-CENSIS report and its public presentation and debate, the Minister for Heritage and Cultural Activities, Giovanna Melandri, took action. To date, she has (i) sent a circular letter to all organisations receiving state funding, in which they are reminded that public money must be used for the creation, promotion and presentation of works of art (in all fields) by both women and men, and (ii) set up a commission to review the actual legislation regarding welfare, maternity, pension benefits, and social security measures, that would recognise the special needs of women working in live entertainment.

Quite clearly Minister Melandri's quick and clear action following the presentation of the research must be read as a very large step forward. Yesterday there were no data bases, no research and one might also surmise, very little public or political interest. Today the tip of an iceberg has been uncovered and it is going to be very important that the iceberg doesn't slide back into the water. The research has raised a number of important questions: What is the real status attributed to women working in the arts and culture? How do they see themselves? What are the equal opportunity measures that need to be undertaken to enable the state to introduce "new citizenship" for women in these fields? Might it not be possible to envisage clearly and loosely designed networks between women in decisional making positions and those creating culture and art, and those working in the related industries? What can be done to avoid a double marginalization of women artists – first as women and then as artists? What measures should be introduced to facilitate the enormous double burden that women with families and children face? How can the gap between their reality and the "myth" perpetuated by the media, be reduced?

### **3. Initiatives from Civil Society**

As in other European countries, policies and programmes for the promotion of equal opportunities might be advanced in the overall labour market, but is rarely considered in the fields of the arts, culture and media. The social, legal, and employment position of women in the arts, culture and cultural industries has not been contemplated in any way in Italian cultural policy(ies), even though Italy has an excellent record of accomplishment as far as equal opportunity policies and legislation is concerned. At the time of writing Italy has a Ministry for Equal Opportunities, the CNPO (which is a consultant body to the Government), Equal Opportunity Commissions in every region, province (and in many cities and towns), ministry, public administration and body (including those in the postal services and in hospitals), in many schools, institutions and banks.

Fortunately, Italy has many non-profit associations, volunteer groups and private foundations working on behalf of women in different artistic fields. Below is a list of some of the principal organisations. It should be kept in mind that each of these represent a number of professional categories and are linked to other women's cultural organisations such as "Orlando" (in Bologna, a centre for Women's Studies), the Italian Women Historian's Association, FIDAPA (Federation of Professional Women and Artists), ARCI (Cultural organisation of the Communist Party), ACAI (Catholic Organisation for Artisans), ACAIA (Catholic Organisation for Artists), Associazione di Scuole di Danza (Dance Schools Association), etc.

The *National Centre for Women Dramatists* have proposed the creation of a network to promote knowledge of "gender diversity" in the theatre. Female playwrights are working with socially useful groups such as "Prison Theatre Projects", "Hospital Entertainment", and with some regional and provincial theatres for special series such as "The Theatre against Violence", "Theatre and War". The Centre has a reading committee that circulates works chosen

to the State Theatres. (Professional fields addressed by this Centre include: writers, scenic and costume designers, producers, directors and organisers)

The *Imagine Donna Association* has been running a Festival of Women Film Makers and Women's films for 22 years. The Association works with the University of Siena and other schools to ensure that the history of women in cinema is included in the normal history courses. It also runs "stages" for scriptwriters and directors. (Professional fields addressed by the Association include: directors, technicians, lighting and scenic designers, historians, producers, scriptwriters, actresses)

The *Lega Ambiente* (League for the Environment) is responsible for a project called "Save a Monument" in every part of Italy, thereby encouraging private citizens and schools to contribute to the restoration and conservation of buildings, monuments and open spaces that would not, otherwise, fall within current programmes for Heritage and Patrimony. The League also runs training courses for women wishing to set up small businesses in the cultural industry sector. (Professional fields include: environmentalists, heritage and patrimony researchers, historians and workers within the fields of cultural tourism).

*"Donne in Musica" – "Women in Music" started out as a grass roots initiative at the end of the seventies when interest in women's contribution to public life was probably at its highest in Italy. The undersigned had already carried out a large amount of musicological research, centred around the first Baroque period in Italian vocal music, in Italian archives and libraries and in some major collections in Central, Northern and Eastern Europe and had discovered a great deal of music composed by women. The names were rarely, if ever, mentioned in encyclopaedias, history books and, if they were, it was because they belonged to wives, daughters, sisters or mistresses of other musicians, composers or famous historical personalities. From a first International Festival of Women Composers, held in Rome and funded by the Rome City Council, a movement was born – "Donne in Musica" – "Women in Music". At the beginning there were only a few Italian women musicians, but these were soon joined by musicologists, teachers, performers and sister organisations which sprang up in various parts of Europe and in the USA in the early eighties. Regular festivals presenting historical compositions and newly commissioned works ranging from those for solo voice or instruments to multimedia performances and large scale productions for orchestra, dance and chorus, continued throughout Italy (always with state – city, provincial, regional – funds) until 1994, when the Fondazione Donne in Musica was set up.*

*From 1995 until today the Foundation has run an annual festival devoted to the works of women composers from every part of the world, organised an Annual Musicological Symposium with a different theme and/or period for each edition, published the Acts of the Symposium, undersigned research projects by individual women composers, musicologists and historians in Europe, Asia, Africa and South America, and has also been responsible for the only large scale women's project within the Jubilee and Millennium Celebrations for the year 2000. The Foundation is bound, by statute, to work on behalf of all women creating music in every form and genre possible – from improvised and traditional works to those conceived for commercial purposes (jingles, television, cinema) and that considered "classical" in the Western, Islamic, Indian and Asian traditions.*

*The Foundation is a member of the International Music Council of UNESCO, an active partner with the Italian Foreign Ministry for Cultural Exchange Programmes between Italy and other nations. It works with a Board of Directors, an International Honour Committee comprised of outstanding women in all artistic fields and representatives of "Women in Music Organisations" in different countries. The larger "network" of composers, performers, musicologists and historians is based in 79 countries. It has a large archive of scores, videos, CDs, books, texts etc. The President has been a National Commissioner for Equal Opportunities, consultant to several ministries for cultural policies for women, and a member of many National Commissions where she has been able to carry forward a strong lobby in favour of equal opportunities, transparency and mainstreaming for women composers and women as creators of all artistic forms.*

#### 4. Spotlight: The Share of Women in Music Professions in Italy

In the 23 years of activity "Donne in Musica" – "Women in Music" has seen the number of young women entering conservatories as composition students increase considerably. In 1977, Italy could count only 14 living women composers ranging in age from 26 to 80. There are now more than 300 women composers listed on the data bank of the *Foundation Donne in Musica*; almost 50% of the professors teaching composition (and related courses) in the state conservatories are women and 64% of all teachers in music schools and conservatories are also women. Italy has 96 conservatories – some regions have three or four – and nearly 500 artistic lyceums where music is one of the principal courses offered. There are also civic and communal music schools which can be state or privately funded. The number of private music schools (for all kinds of music) is hitherto uncertified.

In 1977 only 6 women composers, conductors, librettists, arrangers and musicologists (of any period) were mentioned in the existing Italian language encyclopaedias. The most recent edition of DEUM (UTET, Turin) has over two thousand listed. There are also books, dictionaries and smaller scale encyclopaedias devoted entirely to Italian women or to women composers.

The presence of women composers in the programmes presented by smaller and medium size festivals and concert series has risen considerably. There are also a number of associations, festivals and cultural associations for "Women in Music" collaborating directly with the *Foundation Donne in Musica*. Ten conservatories and civic music schools are currently running "Women in Music" history courses. The majority of the small concert and festival organisations ("Associazioni di Concerti" – "Associazioni Artistico/Culturali") are in fact run by women, but as the financial (and visibility) level of the organisation rises (national and regional annual festivals – traditional opera houses and orchestra series) the number of women called up to direct them, and included as composers in the programming, diminishes.

There are 140 major opera houses, festivals and orchestras ("Ente" or "Fondazioni Culturali") in Italy which are heavily state funded. In 1999 and 2000 only 2 of these institutions had women as Intendants (usually a political posting, rarely given to a "technician") and none had a woman as Artistic Director.<sup>220</sup> Here the number of works by women programmed is very low indeed. Only two of the state opera houses and one international festival have women on their boards of directors.

In 1977, only 4 Italian women (and 3 foreigners) had ever conducted in Italy. Today a number of regional orchestras have resident women directors and a recent spot-check registered (for

---

<sup>220</sup> Some of the most prestigious positions in Italian cultural life are those afforded to Intendants and artistic directors of opera houses, symphony orchestras and festivals. In order to obtain the experience and knowledge about the internal running of such large enterprises it is important to be nominated as a member of a Council or Board. Very few women are ever nominated and thereby are never given a chance to learn the "ways and means of organisational power". Those women who are nominated to the boards may not be either technicians (musicians, actresses, directors, playwrights, composers) or administrative people. Usually they are called in as "token women" and are candidates from one or other of the political parties. For these councillors, a seat on an opera house board is equal to being on the board of any other state organisation. Nomination as an Intendant or artistic director comes after many years of apprenticeship as a member of a Board, professional experience (sometimes) in an artistic field or as director of a smaller festival and/or theatre, and is always the result of a coalition of political parties who push forward the candidacy. Should we be surprised that so few women go all out to move through this labyrinth? Carla Fracci, Italy's most prestigious woman dancer, moves from one theatre to another as Director of the Ballet School, or Department, and has just been nominated "Ballet Director" for the Rome Opera House. It is unlikely that she would ever be a candidate for an Intendant's position.

the year 2000 alone) the presence of 15 Italian women orchestral conductors, 40 choral conductors and 6 foreign orchestral conductors, listed in the programmes of the middle and higher range festivals, opera and concert series.

Composer Irma Ravinale has recently been elected "Accademica di Santa Cecilia", the highest honour that the musical world can bestow upon a composer, but the famous Accademia di Santa Cecilia (with full time permanent orchestras, choirs and chamber ensembles) has only programmed works by 14 women in the last fifty years.

In 1994, RAI TV (Italian national television network) undersigned a programme series entitled "Donne in Musica" which consisted of thirty programmes about women as creators, performers and "movers" in all fields of musical endeavour.

Until recently, Italian Radio had three channels devoted almost entirely to music (in various forms and genres) and many women composers and musicologists ran programmes where they could programme works by other women. With the closing down of four radio orchestras and three professional choirs (Turin is the only centre with a permanent radio orchestra and choir) at the time of writing there are only 4 ongoing RAI radio programmes which give any time at all to contemporary "classical" music.

In 1998, a group of publishers working on the more "popular" and "commercial side" of the business ran a large scale enquiry into the role of women working therein and came up with some astounding empirical facts and figures. The research revealed a "lack of confidence shown by record companies toward women – as composers, writers, performers". They also included complaints about "sexual harassment for women in the business" and, what one well-known rock singer and author described as "media interest in raw flesh but not talent".