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The Absence of Female Composers in the Development of Modern Dance

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Abstract

Modern dance is largely defined by iconic female choreographers but the musical compositions used in this dance genre are disproportionately from male composers. There is a marked absence of female composers throughout the development of modern dance, especially notable in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Despite modern dance's affinity towards the female body and feminist themes, the soundtrack for the genre seems strangely reliant on male composers. By examining three case studies focused on collaborations between choreographers and composers, this paper explores the social obstacles and influences that originated a pattern of male-dominated compositions in modern dance.

The first case study examines the origin of modern dance in danced interpretations of precomposed music. Loïe Fuller's Fire dance set to Richard Wagner's Ride of the Valkyries started a pattern of modern choreographers capitalizing on productions featuring music with an already established popularity. The second case study examines a notable disruption in the pattern of female choreographers working with male composers. Vivian Fine's score for Doris Humphrey's The Race of Life is a rare example of a female composer collaborating with a female modern choreographer. The third case study looks at the long-lasting collaboration between modern choreographer Martha Graham and male composer Louis Horst. Their partnership spanned across twenty-two years and heavily influenced the interaction between music and modern dance. These chronological case studies examine the causes and influences that led modern dance, a genre of art steeped in feminist ideology and personalities, to develop as a male-dominated music scene.