many classical piano teachers are interested in expanding their repertoire lists to include a more diverse roster of composers, including women. I was interested in the student perspective on these measures: examining what college-aged pianists already know about women composers and their exclusion from the canon. I sent a survey to 93 piano programs in Canada and the U.S. and received 110 responses from undergraduate piano majors. The survey covered demographic information, their past experiences with playing women composers, and their interest in programming women composers in the future.

The results were sobering but not necessarily surprising: 74% of undergraduate piano majors have played music by one or no women. Students have primarily learned about women composers online on their own, and nearly every respondent wanted more resources from teachers and courses. They demonstrated mixed levels of knowledge about women’s canonical exclusion: many believed that no women composed before the 20th century or thought that they composed only small works. Some students also communicated concerns that promoting women composers could either tokenize them or compromise the quality of music performed, highlighting a need for discussing holistic canon formation alongside teaching the work of women composers.

After reading these responses and background literature, my main recommendation for teachers is to consistently include music by women in their teaching repertoire and to expose students to a wide variety of their music. Universities would do well to expand repertoire requirements for auditions and juries so students can choose these works without professional repercussions. Critically, teachers should also discuss historical barriers for women’s entry into composition, intersectional issues of class and race, and the process of canonical formation so students have a broader understanding of classical music’s landscape. Classical music is becoming more inclusive, and the next generation of pianists is eager for the change.

Kate Acone, NCTM, is an American pianist and pedagogue currently studying for a DMA at the University of Toronto. Her research interests include popular music pedagogies and women composers.
North American Undergraduate Pianists’ Perceptions of Women Composers
Kate Acone • University of Toronto

Introduction
Piano teachers are now, more than ever, aware of the need to diversify their teaching repertoire at every level. Women composers have been historically underrepresented in classical music, and while institutions and individuals have undertaken efforts to promote their music, the problem still lingers. Studies have shown that adolescents perceive the same music differently when they think it was written by a woman vs. a man, and a recent study of high school students found that just playing women composers’ music did not correct students’ misconceptions about women’s historical and current exclusion in the canon. This study looks at the North American undergraduate pianist population to examine their common knowledge, experiences, and attitudes towards women composers.

Methodology
110 North American undergraduate students filled out an online survey, which was divided in thirds. The first section covered demographic information, including their country, major, and year in school. The second section asked them to cite past experiences with women composers: to list the women composers they have played, to list the women composers they know of, and to summarize why they think there are not relatively more famous women composers in classical music. The final section, about resources, asked about where they have learned about women composers, whether they are interested in more resources, and if so, which venues they wished offered those resources. The optional final question allowed for general comments.

Results

Discussion
Much of this data is sobering on its own. 74% of undergraduate piano majors have played music by one or no women. These students have primarily learned about women composers online on their own, and nearly every respondent wanted more resources from teachers and courses. Students’ cited reasons for the relative lack of women in composition was revealing for both their insights and their lingering misconceptions. Many students did not think that women composed before the 20th century or thought that they composed mostly small works. Several students used the optional free-response section to communicate their concerns about the tokenization of women or that this promotion would only be temporary.

Recommendations for Teachers
The most tangible step is for teachers to consistently include music by women in their teaching repertoire, and to expose students to a wide variety of their music. For universities, expanding repertoire requirements for auditions and juries will empower students to choose these works without professional repercussions. In order to effectively combat common misconceptions, it is critical to discuss historical barriers for women’s entry into composition and the methods of canon formation alongside programming this music. As several students pointed out, too, discussing intersectionality of how class and race affected classical composition’s landscape is essential.

Literature Cited

Further Information
www.kateacone.com

Acknowledgments
Dr. Midori Koga, Advisor