

SOUNDING OUT GENDERS COME OUT AND PLAY! WHY ARE GENDER AND FEMINIST STUDIES SO LATE TO COME TO MUSIC?

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Feminist and gender studies in music began much later than similar discussions in other disciplines. Susan McClary, who authored one of the first texts to systematically explore the intersections of gender, music and sexuality—and this text was published in 1991— says that for a woman musicologist to discuss these issues prior to the late '80s would have been professional suicide, because there were so few women musicologists at that time that they were granted, in her words, only “tentative toe-holds.” (1991: 5). Indeed, prior to McClary’s 1991 publication, it was a book authored by someone who identified herself as a literary critic that perhaps had most influence on many feminist musicians: *Opera, Or the Undoing of Women*, published in France in 1979, translated into English in 1988, and written by Catherine Clément.

What is it about music that has kept it so resistant to feminist and gender studies? Several theorists point to music’s association with the body and with subjectivity. Music makes us dance, we listen to it for sensuous pleasure. It is the least visual of the arts—an audience can have a direct bodily experience of music with our eyes closed. Music moves through us without boundaries: it cannot be framed, pinned down, or shut out by ears that can only be open. Music is linked to the rhythms of the body, of sexuality.

Because of its ephemerality and visceral power, music has been classified as dangerous. Philip Brett, in a recently published volume of queer musicology, says:

Music has often been considered a dangerous substance, an agent of moral ambiguity always in danger of bestowing deviant status upon its practitioners. Both Plato and Aristotle saw it in these terms. Theirs was a legacy of moral doubt that infected much of the writing about music in the West, from St. Augustine’s anguish about being moved more by the voice than by the words to the attacks of the Calvinists...Nonverbal even when linked to words, physically arousing in its function as initiator of dance, and resisting attempts to endow it with, or discern in it, precise meaning, it represents that part of our culture which is constructed as feminine and therefore dangerous. (1994:11-12)

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Other aspects of music besides its association with the body and with sexuality also make it dangerous. One of these is the fact that music is not confined to a space, but rather extends space. The contexts for listening to music, as ethnomusicologist Beverley Diamond pointed out to me, are much more extreme than those for viewing theatre, art or film. A rock concert extends to thousands at once, whereas a portable Walkman encloses the listener in a personal bubble of sound. This means that the social experience of music is hard to control.

Music's meaning is also hard to pin down. Unlike many images, and almost all verbal expression, music is connotative rather than denotative: it is not explicitly referential. Its meaning is sometimes socially shared, but more often individually interpreted or evaluated. We all know that music means something to us, that it often means a great deal. But the symbolic or culturally-shared meanings of music are hard to control because they are so slippery, so changeable and ephemeral, like the sound itself.

Faced with these dangers in music of effeminacy, escape from boundaries, and resistance to symbolic definition, musical practitioners have responded in a number of ways. McClary lists these as: "defining music as the most ideal (that is the least physical) of the arts;...insisting emphatically on its "rational" dimension;...laying claim to such presumably masculine virtues as objectivity, universality, and transcendence;...prohibiting actual female participation altogether" (1991: 17). Insistence on the rational dimension of music is reflected in Western music's development of intricate harmonic rules and notation. The *sound of music cannot be pinned down, but the written score can be analyzed, quantified, and explained*. Faced with a multitude of meanings, music analysts defined music as having no social meaning whatsoever, and elevated to the highest rank what is known as "absolute" music: music without a program, with no supposed reference to anything outside itself.

Electroacoustic music, in its movement away from the written score and towards the sounds of the world around us, liberates composers from this masculinization of their profession, this concern with rationalization, and control of the dangerous feminine. Or does it? Computers allow composers to quantify and analyze not only pitch and velocity, but also, through Fourier transform graphs, to analyze timbre—the quality of sound that sociologist John Shepherd (1987) describes as the most physical. The language of the studio tells us that we can master sound, control it, bang it, punch it, or even kill it. The recording process, as McClary points out, allows us to experience the pleasure of sound "without the troubling reminder of the bodies producing it" (1991: 136), and with synthesis, we can produce symphonies without human performers, using timbres produced by algorithms. This continuing masculinization of musical composition using new technologies is reflected in the demographics of electroacoustic composition, in which women remain a minority.

This is not to say that there is no room in electroacoustic music for questioning gender roles and dualistic divisions. John Cage proposed in 1937 that music produced with the aid of electrical instruments would change what we perceive as music, because all sounds, not just instrumental sounds, could be considered musical material (1961: 3). In the move away from the rules of instrumental composition, fissures have opened in the soundscape that allow experimentation with accepted ideas of what music is, and how-why-when-where-who performs it. The panelists today are all Canadian composers whose work I have become familiar with. They all experiment with these questions.

Introductions:

Kathy Kennedy has an approach to radio that I find transgressive, powerful, and exuberant. She has built a one-watt radio transmitter and uses it for pieces that she calls "sonic choreographies," and "musical interventions." She leads a thirty voice women's choir, transmitting a sound track that the singers receive on boom boxes and that accompanies their singing. On International Women's Day, 1993, the choir did a musical intervention at Montréal City Hall. As well as wreaking havoc with the security guards, the uninvited concert brought joy to the hearts, and smiles to the faces, of the office workers. This kind of musical intervention brings into question where music should—or can—be performed, at the same time that it empowers the choir members who take part and the office workers who enjoy the show. Kathy will be talking today about the dissipation of the human voice through technologies such as radio.

Hildegard Westerkamp is concerned, both in her compositional practice and in her acoustic research, with listening environments. She says that she wants to transport her listeners, to create a place that will allow people to breathe. When she thinks about listening environments, she is concerned both about the physical location, and the metaphorical space she creates. This environment can also be a place where technology can balance sounds differently, drawing attention to the small sounds that are often almost inaudible: making, for instance, crickets louder than airplanes, or barnacles louder than city noise. But she does not do this to fool the listener into believing in an idealistic paradise: in *Kit's Beach Soundwalk*, for instance, she draws the listener's attention to the technological processes that shift the balance between sounds. Hildegard will be talking today about listening and technology.

Susan Frykberg's works often develop themes of motherhood, technology, and agency. *MachineWoman*, a performance piece, employs the cyborg character of MachineWoman to tell parables about the relationships between people and technology. *Mother Too*, a vocal work, uses electronics to extend the possibilities of the voice in an exploration of the sounds of motherhood. *Woman and House*, a work of electroacoustic music theatre, ascribes agency to household appliances and the house itself, as these beings and the two human characters learn about their relationships with each other. Susan will be talking about

her ways of combining electroacoustic music, theatre, and conceptual ideas from the point of view of a woman and mother. In particular, she draws parallels between the blurring of media boundaries and the subsequent cross-fertilization of ideas, and the blurring of physical and psychic boundaries in pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood.

Wende Bartley has written several electroacoustic works that explore the creative, erotic and spiritual potential of the female voice. Operatic convention allows the female voice to be the most beautiful, to soar to the greatest heights and with the most freedom, but the price for this is high—often the death of the character. Unlike the opera heroines who transgress musical and social boundaries, and therefore must be destroyed, Wende's characters are never tamed. They move from silence through fragmentation to speech with a clarity of vision, in her piece *Rising Tides of Generations Lost*. In another work, *A Silence Full of Sound*, the protagonist moves from repressed sexuality to joyful wildness. In *Ellipsis*, the textless vocal part employs a wide palette of vocables to express an emotional range of remarkable intensity. Wende will be talking today about her work with the potentialities of the female voice.

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Acknowledgments

Thanks to today's panelists, as well as Claire Piché, Lucie Jasmin, Pascale Trudel, Monique Jean, Helen Hall, Gayle Young, Sarah Peebles, Elma Miller, Ann Southam, and Carol Ann Weaver for the insights about electroacoustic music that they passed on to me in interviews. Thanks also to Professor Beverley Diamond of York University for her thought-provoking commentary on this paper.

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