

Gender and the Field of Musicology

By Marcia J. Citron

The rise of studies in music and gender numbers among the most recent and significant developments in the field of musicology. Gender has come into its own as an analytical category in music only in the last ten years or so, and even though issues that would now fall under the topic of gender were discussed early in the 1980s, especially in work on women, the conscious and deliberate use of the term itself is even more recent. In its relatively brief existence, however, gender has had a profound impact on the field. As a major area of critical theory, gender has linked musicology with other humanistic disciplines and many in the social sciences. Even more important, gender has raised and responded to new questions in the history of music and broadened the sweep and complexity of the discipline. It has helped to redefine categories and methodologies and opened up new possibilities for understanding musical works. What I would like to consider below is the present status and influence of gender studies within the discipline, and the ways in which gender might continue to be a major force in the field in the years to come.

Before the early 1980s, musicology was mainly a positivist discipline. Critical, speculative studies, to which gender studies belong, were few and far between, and in this respect the discipline lagged behind other fields. For all practical purposes, the concept of gender did not exist in the study of music. The working, albeit unarticulated, assumption was that the object of study was male and usually undifferentiated as to class, race, sexuality, and other social factors. Yet because these variables were unstated, such studies tended to lay claims to universality. Consequently, important differences were papered over and other groups marginalized, especially women.

By 1985, the appearance of Joseph Kerman's *Contemplating Music* seemed to reflect, if not initiate, a change of attitude in the field. Critical studies appeared more frequently and provided an environment in which the study of music and gender was capable of flourishing. Musicologists looked to other fields, especially history, literature, and anthropology, for methodology and content, and feminism and gay and lesbian studies became some of the most important beneficiaries of this interdisciplinary theory. In fact, musicological models have been modified to the extent that many practitioners have had to re-educate themselves in the ways of other fields—almost like switching careers in midstream. For musicology as a whole it has meant an expanded array of subject matter and new possibilities for traditional areas.

Since my own research experience involves gender and its relationship with women, I will steer my remarks mostly in this direction. At the same time, it is important to recognize that gender is a rich, complex category, one not limited exclusively to this issue, and that there is much work to be done in sorting out the theory and its practical implications. Generally described as the social constructedness of the cultural meanings of male and female, gender encompasses many issues, including sexuality. There is a fair amount of controversy, however, over the relationships among internal categories. For example, are male and female dualistic concepts? Oppositional? If there is a continuum within gender, then what are the end points? Are they male and female? How would sexual orientation figure into such a scale? Approaches run the gamut from constructivism to essentialism, with most practitioners somewhere in between. Some even find the very concept of gender problematic, especially recent feminists; while recognizing gender's value for women's issues, they worry that its appropriation for issues concerning men could lead to the marginalization of women.¹ This is ironic, given that feminists found gender useful in the first place as a means of ultimately removing women from the margins.

This is not the forum to explore in detail the problematic nature of gender, but it is important that the tensions be acknowledged. Tensions need not be negative factors, however; in this case, they suggest a flexibility that can accommodate diverse perspectives and approaches in music. Indeed, I prefer to see gender as an analytic category that infuses many kinds of musicological work rather than as some separate area cordoned off under the label "gender studies." Of course, there are individuals who focus on issues of gender in their work, and their specialty might be called gender studies. Yet their collective work covers the gamut of topics, from Medieval to contemporary, performance to reception, sociology to aesthetics, historiography to sexuality. This breadth suggests that the value of gender runs throughout much of the discipline and that one risks misunderstanding its place and undermining its usefulness by forcing gender studies into a separate niche.

Inherent in this discussion is the implication that gender does not fit neatly into traditional categories of musicology. Like other concepts taken from social theory, it upsets the neatness of the old models, if indeed they were that neat in the first place. Gender is obviously not comparable to a historical period, nor a blueprint for gathering objective data about a person or a work. It is neither biography nor style analysis. Instead, it is a means of structuring problems and issues and how one interprets them, and thus has the potential to modify the field significantly. Gender is already affecting the major categories of musicology, and I suspect that it will continue to do so. It is no longer easy to categorize the field mainly in

terms of historical periods, or areas like biography, sketch studies, or archival work. Too many scholars are doing work that cuts across such categories, and gender has been instrumental in this reconfiguration. It has helped to foster an emphasis on music-as-practice, for example, with practice now a more heterogeneous concept than mere process. The composer remains an important agent but now shares the stage with others, including performers, patrons, critics, audiences, and individual listeners. Furthermore, the sociology behind practice helps to dismantle the walls between art music and other kinds of music, among them pop, jazz, and world music. As a result, the boundaries between musicology and other structures for discussing music begin to erode, and the possibilities for musical discourse expand.

Gender as an analytical category can be viewed as a challenge to some of the basic assumptions of the field. While I do not believe that this is the fundamental reason why practitioners choose topics that utilize gender, it is at the least a consequence of such work. Like other categories of social construction, gender explodes the insularity of music. It underscores the idea that music relates to real human experiences and to aspects of identity and social location. It emphasizes the notion that socialization as male or female, and one's sexuality, do matter in artistic expression. Gender further challenges the conventional wisdom of the field by raising questions about the ideology of art music as an ennobling art form representative of universal human experience; in other words, it challenges the moral authority of "classical" music. Consequently some might find gender uncomfortable or even threatening, and this is one reason why it engenders resistance.² The field is gradually acclimating itself to such deconstructive strategies, but additional time is probably needed before gender moves into a more central position in the discipline. Understandably, some advocates might view such a transformation with concern, since one of the strengths of a gendered approach, it might be argued, resides in its capacity for viewing conventions from a position outside the center. But making such a stand at the borders of the discipline might prove impractical. Gender will probably be most effective when it can infuse disciplinary discourse from a position of authority, which implies some location in or near the center (or centers). Furthermore, it is a questionable premise that one has to be on the outside to mount critical challenges. Positioning that enables fluid movement between inside and outside might prove more successful in effecting change.

As one might expect, gender is more pertinent to certain areas than others. Pursuits that grow out of the positivist tradition of musicology—archival studies, sketch studies, and the preparation of editions—are less likely to benefit from gender, for example. In contrast, gender can be of

great use to the many areas that consider social factors—which does not mean, however, that gender ought to serve as the only approach. That might be appropriate for some topics, of course, as in a study of how a composer's sexual orientation could influence reception. But for others, gender could function as one factor among many to be taken into account. A word of caution is necessary here, however: gender should not be associated merely with historical outsiders. While they might seem the most obvious focus of a gendered approach, it is crucial that mainstream figures and institutions also be subjected to social analysis, and that means, among other things, gender. Indeed, one of the goals of social analysis is the deconstruction of the constructedness of the conditions surrounding those figures and institutions that make up the mainstream. Without such analysis, the mainstream seems natural and inevitable—a distortion that masks the complex relationships between music and culture, as well as the importance of process in the conventions behind the mainstream.

Gender can be extremely useful for biography.³ It locates the individual within a specified social group or groups and also views the individual as an individual, though one operating within specified bounds. Thus gender works the spaces between the individual and group, and this proves to be one of its most attractive features for biography. In the case of a woman, for example, gender can highlight contradictions in socialization that are caused by her upbringing in dominant institutions. It can underscore the likely possibility of what literary critic Judith Fetterley calls *immascultation*: identification with men, against herself as a woman.⁴ It can reveal the psychological costs of such situations and the ambivalence that often results from this identification. One need only read some of the statements of women like Fanny Hensel and Clara Schumann, or various contemporary composers,⁵ to realize that factors directly related to gender affect their cultural position. Overall, gender as an analytical category affords a valuable vehicle for accessing issues critical to an understanding of a woman's life and historical position, issues that might otherwise be ignored because of an absence of methodology for identification and interrogation. Such methodology owes a great deal to feminist theory, of course, which itself is heavily indebted to the theory and methodology of various disciplines. In any case, the biographical potential offered by the category of gender should not be reserved exclusively for the study of women's lives; comparable approaches can also be used for biographical studies of men.

Gender also has much to offer historiography, that sprawling category that encompasses many others. As mentioned above, gender helps to reshuffle the categories, and this itself is beneficial to the field. Of the diverse topics in historiography, one of the most important is canon for-

mation, an area of particular interest to me.⁶ Here gender is critical: it provides an analytical category that can expose many of the assumptions and ideologies behind seemingly value-free conditions that have promoted the Western canon (or canons). For example, gendered ideologies behind creativity and professionalism tell us a great deal about why and how women composers have been excluded from mainstream practices in art music. They also reveal many of the conventions that led to the inclusion of certain works and composers. Thus, gender is not confined to marginal groups but has the ability to probe the central tradition and how it became that way.

Gender could also be useful for critiques of periodization, an important component of historiography. It might show that some of the bases for coherence within periods and division between them are inflected by considerations of gender, especially female gender. Works by women might suggest other bases for categorization, such as a greater emphasis on function and site. There is also the problem of the appropriateness of the names. The Renaissance, for example, did not necessarily mark a rebirth of women's artistic fortunes, and the Romantic period did not mean the kinds of existential utterances found in many works by men.⁷ Of course, the present array of periods is problematic even when one leaves aside considerations of gender; questions remain about labels, about placement of boundaries, and about the identification and ranking of defining musical characteristics. But whether or not we ultimately decide on replacements for the current system, categorical exploration via gender raises questions that go well beyond gender itself and touch on some fundamental issues in musicology.

* * *

As important as gender is for biography and historiography, however, perhaps the most burning question regarding gender is whether it is present in a piece of music. I hear this question frequently: from students, laypeople, and professionals. Although it is relatively easy to answer in the affirmative, from that point on the details of how, where, and under what circumstances become difficult. One problem is that "presence" may be taken to mean literal presence in the sense of being readily perceivable. That suggests something that can be heard and identified as gendered, or something that a performer or analyst could visually recognize in the score as gendered. Yet while there may be elements of a text accompanying a musical work that readily refer to gender, as a general rule one cannot hear gender in musical language or musical gestures in and of themselves. To put it another way, there is no such thing as an inherently gendered

interval, chord, or musical line. But the situation is not that simple. Many features of musical language have been ideologically associated with gender at various times, and this means that music can become a vehicle for the representation of ideologies of masculinity or femininity, or sexuality, that have been constructed in society. These are not inherent or universal meanings; they are socially contingent references. The challenge in historical work is to identify such references and to find out what they meant at the time they originated and what they came to mean through the various stages of their history. And even if we do not have obvious evidence of their longevity, some may have been incorporated into other kinds of conventions, musical or otherwise. Part of the difficulty is that it is likely that many associations were unwritten yet perfectly understood at a given time. Given the discipline's traditional emphasis on the written document, many musicologists may find themselves at a loss without written evidence and consequently assume that nothing significant is at stake. Obviously, we need to expand our methodologies to deal with such conventions, and ethnomusicology probably has a lot to offer in this regard.

Speculation about unwritten codes may sound tenuous or fanciful, yet it is important to bear in mind the power of the written gendered musical associations we do know about. There are the gendered descriptions of the themes of sonata form that apparently began with A. B. Marx in 1845 and extend past the middle of the twentieth century.⁸ There are masculine and feminine cadences and masculine and feminine rhythms, and the association of the major mode with the masculine and the minor with the feminine. In each case the masculine refers to musical characteristics deemed strong, active, and independent, while the feminine alludes to characteristics that are weak, passive, and dependent: qualities associated with man and woman in contemporary ideology. This does not mean that real men and women actually exhibited such traits. What it does mean is that contemporary ideals delineated this behavior and that they could affect real people; for instance, behavior beyond prescribed norms could lead to ambivalence and contradiction. To be sure, if these ideological references were evident in only one musical convention, we might be tempted to discount it as an aberration. But given a pattern of such associations, we cannot. What is more, the pattern strongly suggests the existence of unwritten codes we may not know about yet. Though some might argue that gendered codes of representation in music should be ignored because they are obsolete or repressive, we must remember that these ideologies were indeed real in the history of ideas and had the potential to affect practice. To ignore them is to distort the past.

There is another aspect of representation we need to consider: a strategy of representation deployed by a composer in a given work. In instru-

mental works this can mean manipulating understood codes, as in the case of inflections on the ideologies behind the gendered codes of sonata form. In texted works it can mean musical language that comments on ideologies of masculine and feminine conveyed by the text and that constructs images of masculinity and femininity *vis à vis* those ideologies. While most research on gendered representation has focused on texted works, probably because of the obvious narrativity and the availability of models from literary theory, gendered representation in instrumental music holds out great promise. With the formidable methodological obstacles such work presents, the analyst may find him- or herself on shaky ground. But short-term risk may be the necessary price for staking out new territory that will be of great importance in the long term.

Representation should not be confused with the gender of the maker; a composer of either gender is capable of deploying compositional strategies that involve gender. Nonetheless, this theoretical democracy might break down in actual practice because of subject positioning. It can be argued, for example, that because a woman is the subordinate member in Western ideology, the female composer comes to composition and to the gendered codes of musical conventions in a potentially different subject position from a man. I do not mean some essentialist subject position that all women share; it can vary from individual to individual, just as it would from man to man. But there might be a greater likelihood for a woman to feel positioned outside the mainstream—this even though she was herself nurtured in mainstream traditions. Potential contradiction might express itself in strategies of representation that renegotiate the ideological relationships between masculinity and femininity, such that they might amount to a critique of the ideological dominance of man. Let me repeat that such strategies are available to a male composer as well as a female. But the realities of subject positioning suggest that with regard to compositional strategy, a woman may be more likely to critique female objectification than would a man.

While it is clear that I believe that analysis according to gender is extremely important, I do not necessarily view it as a replacement for other kinds of musical analysis such that other approaches should be categorically eliminated from consideration. Nor do I see it as an approach that should always function as the main analytical approach. What I do believe is that gender is one of many possible methodologies for providing meaning about a composition, and as regular practice it should be considered an important option for understanding a composition. Unless the analyst is a die-hard adherent to a particular system, decisions as to what kinds of approaches are suggested by the work, composer, historical context, and particular aims of the analysis are made early in the project,

and the possibilities offered by gender should be considered at this stage. I am also suggesting that gender, like any other single approach to analysis, cannot possibly provide all the "answers" to the meaning of a composition. If it does represent the sole analytical approach in a given project, the analysis should be understood as a partial exploration of the richness of the work. Yet the more likely and useful scenario is that gender will be deployed in combination with other approaches. I am not implying an ideal of the totalizing analysis, only that gender can work well with other approaches, and their interaction may provide insights that are otherwise not evident. Because gender exposes layers of meaning beyond the framework of the score, it can be especially useful in the classroom, as we attempt to place music in its cultural context.

* * *

My remarks on analysis probably represent a projection for the future as much as a description of current practice. At present gendered analytical approaches are utilized mainly by specialists in gender. Much of the discipline is ignorant of its possibilities for musical analysis, and even many who are aware of these possibilities are still resistant to them. Yet attitudes can change over time, and I prefer to be moderately optimistic about the long-range prospects for gender. If one considers its astonishing progress over the past ten years, it is not difficult to envision comparable strides in the next decade and beyond.

I see several factors motivating these changes. First, as time passes, more work will be done, and the category will not seem so radical. Presentations on gender are already a commonplace at the annual meeting of the American Musicological Society, as are books and conferences devoted specifically to gender. Second, graduate programs in musicology are increasingly incorporating critical theory into their curricula. While it is less clear how much attention is devoted to gender, the modifications suggest that future scholars will at least be familiar with much of the theory behind gender studies and better prepared to handle a broader range of methodologies. I expect to see many more dissertations that deal with gender. Indeed, the abundance of topics aired at the first and second Feminist Theory and Music Conferences (1991 and 1993), especially by younger scholars, attests to a vigorous ground swell of interest. Of course, we cannot assume that students exposed to interdisciplinary theory will necessarily embrace it wholeheartedly or decide to incorporate it into their work. But they will understand its potential as an analytical category alongside other options at their disposal. One caveat, however: at present there are very few schools with specialists in gender on the faculty. Al-

though a specialist in a given area is not essential for a dissertation project, practically speaking the absence of one would tend to keep down the number of students that pursue such a course of study.

A third reason behind the changes is demographics. Women are populating the field in proportionally greater numbers, including leadership positions. Although it would be foolish to posit a direct correspondence between presence and subject matter, a diversity of practitioners nonetheless suggests greater attention to women as historical subjects. This in turn suggests utilization of gender as an analytical category. Societal interest in multiculturalism also encourages the diverse perspectives that gender can offer.

Fourth and last, musicology in general is becoming less insular and more connected to society at large. Already underway are efforts at outreach, aimed at forging links with the community and other professional organizations. Although change over time is inevitable in any organization, musicology seems to be in the midst of a self-conscious redefinition—witness this collection and others—and part of the process involves moving away from the field's elitist origins in late nineteenth-century Germany. As social forces expand the range of subject matter and practitioners, the inviolability and intangibility of art music are being challenged. Gender is both a cause and an effect of such changes, and I believe that we can expect many more in the coming years.

Gender and its relationship to musicology may boil down to a matter of identity. How does the field wish to see itself? Does it yearn to hold on to its elitist status as protector and proponent of the traditional canon and its European values, or does it wish to be something else? Of course the issues are not that simple, nor can there be an expectation of unanimity. The expansion of musicology to include critical theory has introduced, or rather brought to the surface, tensions and contradictions that are palpable. While some might prefer the supposed simplicity of old, I consider the tensions extremely healthy, especially for the future. As for the present and near term, I believe that the discipline is much more interesting because of the expanded range of categories and methodologies. Conference papers and journal articles are much more engaging, for example, and there is a sense that the controversies do matter. Gender can claim some of the credit for the change. Another benefit is that musicology has jumped into the intellectual mainstream of the humanities and social sciences.

Of course there are risks. We could become as factious and politicized as literary criticism. We could become so wrapped up in critical theory that we lose sight of the *raison d'être* of our efforts: music itself. Many believe this has already happened with literature. One hopes that our

roots in musical performance and the sheer aesthetic pleasure of music will temper any disciplinary tendencies toward theoretical excess.

I expect that by the end of the decade the kinds of possibilities I have sketched for gender will be joined by others as yet unimagined. Let this be a prediction in itself. Gender and other social issues force musicologists to examine their desires for the discipline and their relationship to the discipline. While there may be a fair amount of debate, the very process of self-examination will strengthen practitioners and music alike. Like others, I look forward to a vital future for the discipline in the coming years.

NOTES

¹ See, for example, Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991). Judith Butler critiques the essentializing tendencies of recent usage of the category of gender in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

² See especially Pieter C. Van Den Toorn, "Politics, Feminism, and Contemporary Music Theory," *The Journal of Musicology* 9 (1991): 275-99; and the response by Ruth Solie in the next issue of the journal, "What Do Feminists Want? A Reply to Pieter Van Den Toorn," 399-411.

³ See Ruth Solie's essay in this issue.

⁴ Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

⁵ See the responses of several women composers to a survey conducted by Elaine Barkin in *Perspectives of New Music* 20 (1981-82): 288-329.

⁶ See my study *Gender and the Musical Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁷ For a model of how women's history can be reconfigured see Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser, *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).

⁸ For a fuller discussion, especially in connection with absolute music and an analysis of an actual piece, see chapter 4 of my *Gender and the Musical Canon*.