

Difference or Silence?: Women Composers between Scylla and Charybdis

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In just a few years, the introduction—some might say the “invasion”—of feminist study into music scholarship has transformed the discipline: scholars have begun to consider not only women’s music, but also the ways in which gender might affect composition, performance, and analytical discourse. By persistently questioning assumptions about how we make and discuss music, the nascent field of feminist music theory chafes against any sort of methodological complacency. In that tradition, my comments question the ubiquitous emphasis on difference in music-theoretical writings about female composers.

Contrary to popular belief, there is no feminist hegemony. In conceiving this essay, I intended to discuss, in a general fashion, the representation of women composers in the established theoretical journals. That quickly proved impossible: since 1990, neither the *Journal of Music Theory* nor *Music Theory Spectrum* had published a single analysis of a woman’s music.¹ Women fare only slightly better

¹This is especially disheartening given the fact that both journals routinely consider living composers, among whom women are somewhat better represented.

in journals like *Sonus* and *Contemporary Music Review*.² In fact, the only periodical to explore seriously the intersection of feminism and music theory—not surprisingly, given its long-standing adventurous spirit—is *Perspectives of New Music*. In the last few years, *Perspectives* has offered four forums addressing feminism, three of which specifically address feminism and music theory.³

The *Perspectives* articles tackle many topics, among them the body's role in performance, the theorist's personal investment in her work, the potential contribution of cultural studies to music theory, and the masculinism of traditional theoretical language.⁴ When women's music is analyzed, the focus is typically on the ways gender is encoded in the musical text. Undoubtedly, the consideration of difference is integral to feminist music scholarship—after all, who among us has not wondered how her gender might affect her work?—but here and elsewhere, difference-oriented inquiry has virtually silenced other approaches.

²On Hildegard, see *Sonus* 11, no. 1 (Fall 1990); on female composers of Australia, Great Britain, and New Zealand, see *Contemporary Music Review* 11, nos. 1-2 (Fall 1994).

³"Feminist Theory Forum," *Perspectives of New Music* 31, no. 2 (Summer 1993); "Toward a Feminist Music Theory," *Perspectives of New Music* 32, no. 1 (Winter 1994); "Forum on Feminist Music Theory," *Perspectives of New Music* 32, no. 2 (Summer 1994); The "Feminism Forum" of vol. 30, no. 2 (Summer 1992), while containing analytical insights, is concerned primarily with responses to Susan McClary's *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), which falls outside the realm of this discussion. I am not concerned here with whether feminist music criticism includes enough analysis, with whether feminist viewpoints are generally represented (i.e., in regard to men's music), or with the representation of women scholars.

⁴Suzanne G. Cusick, "Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the Mind/Body Problem," *Perspectives of New Music* 32, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 8-27; Marion A. Guck, "A Woman's (Theoretical) Work," *Perspectives of New Music* 32, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 28-43; Susan McClary, "Paradigm Dissonances: Music Theory, Cultural Studies, Feminist Criticism," *Perspectives of New Music* 32, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 68-88; Fred Everett Maus, "Masculine Discourse in Music Theory," *Perspectives of New Music* 31, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 264-93.

For example, after enumerating some of the many complex issues surrounding feminist music theory, Marianne Kielian-Gilbert describes Miriam Gideon's *Of Shadows Numberless* in this way: "The atonality combining the familiar and the banal (melody and 'accompaniment') without idealizing climax, maintains presence, surmounts aesthetic oppression, and admits the possibility of sonic beauty without objectification."⁵ Her interpretation is apparently liberating, but in fact, the assertion of a feminist subtext introduces several difficulties. First, difference-centered theory, when offered to the exclusion of other approaches, implies that women's work is significant only insofar as it illuminates gender. Also, in welcoming alternative strategies, Kielian-Gilbert relies upon the demonization of fundamental compositional resources. (Sonic beauty objectifies; aesthetics oppress.) Male *and* female composers have inherited musical languages and techniques that may be considered masculinist, and some of us still identify with aspects of these inheritances. Must we be ashamed of this? Personally, I find "idealizing climax" indispensable to certain pursuits. Finally, the valorization of female-identified compositional strategies may place inordinate burdens on women. In addition to surmounting the severe obstacles presented by a still largely male-dominated and misogynous profession, must we *also* "surmount aesthetic oppression" as well?⁶ (Since men likely invented aesthetic oppression, why not assign its dismantling to them?)⁷

⁵Marianne Kielian-Gilbert, "Of Poetics and Poiesis, Pleasure and Politics—Music Theory and Modes of the Feminine," *Perspectives of New Music* 32, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 58.

⁶Of course, Kielian-Gilbert does not explicitly demand that all composers *should* create feminist subtexts, but the constant emphasis on difference risks establishing a new, confining hegemony. This anxiety is not as outlandish as it may seem: Asian and Asian-American experimental filmmakers, such as Nam June Paik, have sometimes been ignored by the Asian-American film community, for not being "Asian enough." See Daryl Chin, "Multiculturalism and its Masks: The Art of Identity Politics," *Performing Arts Journal* 40 (January 1992): 1-15.

⁷My apparent flippancy belies a serious concern, that in being expected to prove ourselves in the "man's" arena of traditional theory as well as to take on the "second

Positing an *écriture féminine* allows us to celebrate certain aspects of women's work. But in fetishizing difference, we risk fortifying the already forbidding walls surrounding the female composers' ghetto. The *Contemporary Music Review* has published one issue on women composers in which the issue editor, Nicola LeFanu, eloquently considers the problem of ghettoization; as if to prove her right, other issues of the journal seem willfully to ignore female composers.⁸ The issue on emerging American composers—those born in the 1950s—considers only two women (and twenty-two men), and all the composer-authors are male.⁹ Similarly, although contemporary music is well represented in the *Indiana Theory Review*, its last article on a woman's work was published in 1989.¹⁰ Even in feminist-friendly publications, women are still underrepresented: outside of the above-mentioned forums, *Perspectives* has published only one in-depth discussion of a woman's music since 1990.¹¹ Indeed, alongside Kielian-Gilbert's effusive appreciation of the 1991 Feminist Theory and Music Conference, *Perspectives* printed Marilyn Clingan's boys-only account of June in Buffalo 1992. Having attended the latter, where women were

shift" of feminist theory, we will once again find ourselves doing disproportionate amounts of work.

⁸Nicola LeFanu, "Reclaiming the Muse," *Contemporary Music Review* 11, nos. 1-2 (1994): 1-3.

⁹*Contemporary Music Review* 10, no. 1 (1994). In his introductory note, issue editor David Froom acknowledges that being "all-inclusive or representative" was not his goal (p. 1). Nevertheless, it is significant that he invited only male composer-authors to contribute, and that they wrote almost exclusively about men.

¹⁰Julie Schnepel, "Ellen Taaffe Zwilich's Symphony No. 1: Developing Variation in the 1980s," *Indiana Theory Review* 10 (Spring/Fall 1989): 1-19.

¹¹Judy Lochhead, "Joan Tower's *Wings* and *Breakfast Rhythms I and II*: Some Thoughts on Form and Repetition," *Perspectives of New Music* 30, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 132-56.

relatively well represented, I find this curious.¹² It seems we must choose between being silenced or being differenced, and for some of us, that is no choice at all. Is there an escape from the Scylla that ignores women, other than the Charybdis that celebrates only one aspect of our compositional activity?

The ostensibly feminist expectation that women surmount the constraints of inherited masculinist idioms oddly conspires with the preservation of certain oppressive linguistic tools—specifically, the all-too-familiar binary construct. While it used to be that women's music was either dismissed as "weak" or perversely praised for miraculously attaining a state of masculine grace, these rather insidious formulations have been oddly reclaimed to serve feminist ends.¹³ Despite our best post-structuralist intentions, the binary trap still compels us.¹⁴ It is curious that Rosemary N. Killam emphasizes, "I am not proposing that women and men create music differently or that they create different types of music," and then proceeds to claim that "[Libby] Larsen's music [on a text of Calamity Jane to her daughter] depicts and explains the complexities of Calamity Jane's life."¹⁵ While it seems reasonable

¹²Marianne Kielian-Gilbert, "Feminist Theory and Music Conference, Minneapolis, June 1991: Questions on Ecstasy, Morality, Creativity," *Perspectives of New Music* 30, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 240-42; Marilyn Clingan, "With a Bang (Not a Whimper): June in Buffalo 1992," *Perspectives of New Music* 30, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 290-93. I would find Clingan's silencing of female participants less insidious had she not cited the "virtual emasculation of the National Endowment" as a major cause of contemporary music's underprivileged status, making it quite obvious that she considers male genitalia a necessary component of new music activity. In fact, wouldn't the word "masectomy" better describe the dismantling of a nurturing body like the Endowment?

¹³See Carol Neuls-Bates, *Women in Music: An Anthology of Source Readings from the Middle Ages to the Present* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), particularly the citations of music criticism (pp. 223-27).

¹⁴Along with her other writings, one of the most provocative considerations of this dilemma is Elaine Barkin, "'either/other,'" *Perspectives of New Music* 30, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 206-33. Also see Guck, "A Woman's (Theoretical) Work," and Kielian-Gilbert, "Of Poetics and Poiesis."

¹⁵Rosemary N. Killam, "Women Working: An Alternative to Gans," *Perspectives of New Music* 31, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 243 and 246, respectively.

to presume that Fanny, Clara, and Libby would compose differently than Felix, Robert, and Ben—especially in the setting of a text—we must proceed cautiously in asserting any claims to special female musical knowledge.¹⁶ Judith Butler is a frequent visitor to the feminist music theory pages, but she never stays long. This is puzzling, for even the subtitle of Butler's book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, suggests that her work cannot be used to support a binary-centered notion of a female compositional approach.¹⁷ Perhaps the remarkable persistence of the dualistic construct is simply a measure of its strength: like it or not, in a convoluted music-theoretical sort of Helsinki syndrome, we have adopted the same language that has been used to oppress us.

The binary comes into play, too, in the discussion *about* music-theoretical language. Scholars understandably crave alternative analytical tools. However, when the binary network is invoked, music theory in general is caricatured as masculinist, and any discussion of musical detail is viewed with suspicion. For example, Marion A. Guck writes, "[I]t's not surprising that the old idea of structure still catches at me. My internal conflict between masculine-gendered intellectual standards and feminine-gendered emotional awareness is long standing."¹⁸ While I welcome the traits she views as "feminine," I am troubled by the use of "structure" as a dirty word.¹⁹

¹⁶A comparison of Larsen's piece with Ben Johnston's setting of Calamity Jane texts, *Calamity Jane to Her Daughter*, would be instructive. The latter is recorded by Dora Ohrenstein on her 1993 compact disc *Urban Diva* (CRI CD 654).

¹⁷Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Some of the articles that invoke Butler are the following: Cusick, "Feminist Theory"; Kielian-Gilbert, "Of Poetics and Poiesis"; and Linda Dusman, "Unheard-Of: Music as Performance and the Reception of the New," *Perspectives of New Music* 32, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 130-46.

¹⁸Guck, "A Woman's (Theoretical) Work," 36.

¹⁹See Maus, "Masculine Discourse," for a thoughtful consideration of the reaction to traditional music theory.

The reaction against “formalist, autonomous, positivist, mind-centered, masculinist” music theory has engendered the proliferation of feminist musical interpretations that avoid analytical depth. While I heartily acknowledge the hermeneutic value of readings, particularly when they are seated in the long-standing tradition of music criticism and the more youthful “new musicology,” this approach cannot serve feminist scholarship unless it is complemented by at least *some* studies that delve into musical substance.²⁰ Therefore, I am surprised and disheartened that the vast majority of the published articles that specifically address feminism and music *theory* decorate brief musical excerpts with elaborate, and precariously hung, feminist interpretations. For example, although Kielian-Gilbert acknowledges the dangers of privileging gendered readings of music, she relies on a rather tenuous concept to render Gideon’s *Of Shadows Numberless* feminist. Suzanne G. Cusick offers a provocative consideration of the body’s role in performance, but when she discusses Fanny Hensel’s Trio in D Minor, she too relies upon a vague personification of the music, claiming that the “relationship between the parts” contains a “gender subtext.”²¹ Cusick acknowledges that her analysis is incomplete and will likely be amplified at a later date. Yet even as a projection of future work, her reading of the Trio as “the story of a biological and metaphorical woman seeking entry into masculine discourse” is frighteningly superficial.²²

I tend to appreciate readings, including these, that challenge me to hear a piece in a new way. However, by rushing headlong into fashionable hermeneutics, we seem to have lost the ability and desire

²⁰Of the *Perspectives* articles, the ones that go into the most depth are Janice Mowery Frey, “Elaine Barkin: Active Participant,” *Perspectives of New Music* 31, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 252-63; and Ellen Waterman, “*Cassandra’s Dream Song*: A Literary Feminist Perspective,” *Perspectives of New Music* 32, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 154-72. Is it a coincidence that Waterman’s article, the only one from these forums to focus on a male composer (albeit from a feminist perspective), contains arguably the most detail?

²¹Cusick, “Feminist Theory,” 13.

²²*Ibid.*, 16.

to consider the nuts and bolts of women's music.²³ Perhaps we have internalized, at least to some extent, the long-standing belief that women's music is inferior, and have seized upon difference as an avenue to validation. However, we must continue to acknowledge that women's work is of value whether or not the theorist chooses to address gender issues, and whether or not the music explicitly speaks to female experience.²⁴

Killam has written that the avoidance of gender issues renders an analysis incomplete.²⁵ But is an exclusively gender-based analysis complete?²⁶ In working on Judith Weir, I have mused on the significance of critical reactions, both favorable and unfavorable, to her operas. Paul Griffiths, for example, describes Weir's *Blond Eckbert* as "malnourished" and unengaged, and in the next breath he lauds Harrison Birtwistle's *Gawain* as strong and fearless.²⁷ This may well be a gendered misinterpretation, but the lens of difference can create its own myopia. Cori Ellison's assertion that Weir's use of the middle register constitutes a "truly female compositional voice," although

²³I am serious when I use the word "fashionable": I have heard scholars claim that they are practicing the "new" feminist music scholarship (i.e., that which focuses on *écriture féminine*), and that other types of work are passé. This is particularly insidious when it is used to dismiss the "old" work that made theirs possible.

²⁴The rare articles that discuss women's music in detail without focusing on difference include the following: Lochhead, "Joan Tower's *Wings*"; Robert Carl, "Three Points on the Spectrum: The Music of Louis Karchin, Lois V. Vierk, and Paul Dresher," *Contemporary Music Review* 10, no. 1 (1994): 11-31; and Eric Moe, "Beyond Right and Wrong Ways to Write Music: Tsontakis, Rosenblum, and Diesendruck," *Contemporary Music Review* 10, no. 1 (1994): 149-95.

²⁵Killam, "Women Working," 231.

²⁶Indeed, we must question whether it is fruitful to dismiss any analysis, which inevitably proceeds from a particular point of view, for being incomplete.

²⁷Paul Griffiths, "Musical Events: Knights at the Opera," *New Yorker* 52, no. 24 (August 8, 1994): 69.

more appreciative, is equally limiting.²⁸ (This female composer tends toward the bass register; might I have a gender-identification problem?) I have wondered also whether Weir's gender might be related to her idiosyncratic wit, her restrained approach to drama, and her use of "cross-singing." But to posit such connections without delving deeply into the musical substance does Weir a disservice: we risk appropriating her as a symbol, thereby denying the complexity of her experience. After all, every aspect of her method, explicitly gendered or not, is by definition "truly female."²⁹

Feminist music theory, still in its infancy, has already contributed startling insights to music scholarship. But in enthusing over difference-based studies, we must not exclude other worthwhile approaches. The Hildegards, Claras, and Fannys—as well as the Sofias, Paulines, and Libbys—have much to teach us about gender *and* other matters. Only a thorough appreciation of musical substance, illuminated by our diverse analytical faculties, will allow us to evade the Scylla and Charybdis of silence and difference.

²⁸Cori Ellison, "She Learned Her Noble Song From Oboe and —Bagpipes?," *New York Times*, 10 July 1994, Arts and Leisure, 23.

²⁹My forthcoming dissertation on Weir's *The Consolations of Scholarship* will amplify these views.