

Student Forum

Feminist Music Scholarship: An Informal Guide to “Getting It”

Lyn Burkett

The plot of Aristophanes’s play *Lysistrata* is fairly simple: the Second Peloponnesian War has been going on for a long time. Lysistrata, the protagonist, calls a meeting of women from Athens, Sparta, and other Greek cities involved in the war and tells them that she has a way to bring the war to an end: all women must refuse to have sex with their husbands and lovers until the war is over. This drastic measure is necessary to convince the men that the women are sick and tired of war; if the men don’t get it, well, then, they won’t Get It. Eventually, the men agree to sign a peace treaty and the war does, indeed, end.

As a graduate student interested in feminist ideologies and their applications to music theory, I have on occasion fantasized about employing a variation of Lysistrata’s tactic. In this fantasy, I gather together all of the theorists that I can find whose work is feminist-oriented and convince them to refuse to teach counterpoint, Schenkerian analysis, pitch-class set theory, and all of the other traditional literature until they are sure that all of their students are spending a healthy proportion of their time studying feminist music scholarship. In my fantasy, libraries, publishers, conferences, and even first-year harmony courses transform overnight in response to our ultimatum, and fruitful, rational discussions between scholars with differing opinions flourish across the musical planet.

If there really were a war going on among music theorists, my version of Lysistrata's tactic might be an interesting experiment. But there is no war, there are no lives at stake; though sometimes our discussions may become nearly as heated as any battle, we are relatively safe, and extremely fortunate to be in circumstances where we, as scholars, are able to invest so much of our energy in constructive intellectual pursuits. Still, I keep having that Lysistrata fantasy! Just as Lysistrata wanted passionately to restore peace to her city of Athens, I still want to find some way to bring about some sort of understanding among my colleagues who don't seem to understand what feminist music scholarship is all about. Some theorists have a very good understanding of feminist ideologies and generally disagree with them, or with their applications to music. These are not the people I am addressing here. I am addressing those among you who find yourselves confused by some ideas and terminology used by those of us incorporating feminist thought in our work. Theorists I am addressing may have recently begun reading an article or book by Susan McClary, Ellie Hisama, Marsha Citron, Marianne Kielian-Gilbert, Suzanne Cusick, or any other feminist scholar, only to stop reading half-way through and ask, "Huh?" I am addressing those of you who, like Lysistrata's fighting brothers, are not currently Getting It, in the purely academic sense of the term; it's not so much that you disagree with what any feminist scholar is saying, it's just that so far, you don't understand. Ultimately, I hope that everyone in our music theory community who is even remotely interested in It—and It, in this context, is feminist music scholarship, of course—will be able to Get It whenever and in whatever form she chooses. In the meantime, I would like to offer a brief, informal guide to some of the words and ideas that seem most troublesome to newcomers. My intention here is not to summarize different interpretations of terms and concepts, but to offer brief, introductory explanations for some terms and concepts that feminist scholars are interested in interpreting and investigating.

As a result of a number of discussions that I've been fortunate enough to have with colleagues who are considerably less enthusiastic than I am about anything called feminist, I have begun to realize that individual words, in any contexts at all, often transform themselves into

enormous obstacles that prevent ideas from passing from one mind to another. Without any warning, single words can strip themselves of their intended contexts, leap off a page into your face, and ring incessantly in your ears in a manner that can be quite distracting. Some words, like *gender* or *lady*, may have seemed comfortably familiar to you until you saw them used in a very specific way with which you weren't entirely familiar. Other words, like *queer* or *womon*, may not be the sort of thing you're used to encountering in a music-theoretical context, so maybe they make you a little nervous, or at least momentarily disoriented. The discomfort or nervousness some words may bring about is sometimes, but not always, part of a message or effect an author may be trying to communicate. Once you understand how and why we feminist theorists and musicologists write the way we do, the nervousness and discomfort you feel when you encounter certain words and ideas can serve as a bridge to understanding rather than as an obstacle in the road.

What follows is a list of terms with some very broad, general definitions that will help you understand some ideas that feminist scholars frequently discuss. The definitions are certainly not meant to be all-encompassing; on the contrary, they are meant to serve as a starting point for readers who are new to feminist scholarship.

Construct

A *construct* can be thought of as a collection of behaviors that is implicitly and explicitly encouraged and enforced in different ways by a particular culture. In the United States, a person who wears a dress, lipstick, and high heels is usually considered to be a *woman*, because the idea, or *construct*, of what a *woman* is in the United States includes, and to a certain extent is based on, these behaviors.

Essential

A characteristic is described as *essential* if it is understood as an innate, inescapable feature of the person or persons to whom it is attributed. Some scholars believe that *women* and *men* possess *essential*

characteristics associated with their *genders*. For example, one might say that *women* are nurturing and *men* are competitive. In a frame of reference where these characteristics are understood as *essential*, *women* and *men* would not choose to be nurturing or competitive; more accurately, these types of behavior would be innate qualities linked to an individual's *gender*.

Female/Male

The terms *female* and *male* refer to an individual's biological sex; they can refer to children as well as to adults.

Feminine/Masculine

The terms *feminine* and *masculine* can be applied to people, objects, ideas, or activities. Like *gender*, these terms are often thought of as *constructs* which are implicitly and explicitly enforced by particular cultural criteria. For example, in some parts of the world and in some historical periods, it has been (or is) considered inappropriate for a *woman* to play the trumpet; in such a place or time, it could be said that playing the trumpet was/is *gendered masculine*, that is, an activity almost exclusively associated with *men*.

Gender

Gender is probably one of the first things you expect to notice about people when you look at them. In our culture, when we look at adults, we generally tend to assume that we should immediately be able to label them as *women* or *men* based on the way they dress, their hairstyles, the way they walk, and a combination of other factors. Some scholars would say these factors work together to produce a *construct* of *gender*; some understand gender as an *essential* characteristic that individuals are born with; many others understand *gender* as a combination of *construct* and *essential* characteristics. We usually assume that there are two genders, *woman* and *man*.

Another use of the word *gender*, especially in the context of *gender* studies, is a cause of concern for some feminist scholars. Many scholars studying music and other disciplines feel that they originally set out to study *women*, and to begin to address issues of marginalization that many *women* have faced throughout history and continue to face today. To these scholars, the term *gender* represents the broadening of a field of study or mode of inquiry to include more general issues of *gender*, possibly at the expense of a *woman*-centered perspective.¹

Queer

When *gender*, *sex*, and *sexuality* are addressed with a heterosexual bias, it is often assumed that they will all coincide according to some traditional standard. Figure 1 shows *gender*, *sex*, and *sexuality* “lined up” on a continuum according to a heterosexual perspective; either the second or third column can be read straight down the line for a “traditional” (heterosexual) reading of the relationships between *gender*, *sex*, and *sexuality*. The term *queer* can be used to apply to any situation where *gender*, *sex*, and *sexuality* do not coincide according to the heterosexual model.

In Figure 1, *woman*, *female*, and *man/male* all line up in one column, while *man*, *male*, and *woman/female* line up in another. A heterosexual *woman* would generally be understood as a person whose *gender* is described as *woman*, whose *sex* is described as *female*, and whose *sexuality*—that is, the *gender* and *sex* of persons to whom she is physically attracted—is oriented toward *men*. *Gender*, *sex*, and *sexuality* can each fall on either the *woman/female/man/male* side of Figure 1, on the *man/male/woman/female* side, or anywhere in between; furthermore, an individual’s *gender*, *sex*, and *sexuality* need not fall in a straight vertical line. In the most general sense, scholars interested in

¹For an excellent discussion of gender as it relates to musicology, see Marcia J. Citron, “Gender and the Field of Musicology,” *Current Musicology* 53 (1993): 66-75.

queer theories are interested in subject matter that does not form a straight line on either the extreme left or extreme right of the *gender/sex/sexuality* continuum in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Gender, Sex, and Sexuality Continuum

gender	woman < ----- > man
sex	female < ----- > male
sexuality	man/male < ----- > woman/female

For some scholars, the word *queer*, especially in the context of *queer* studies, has a connotation parallel to that of the term *gender* (see above). Many scholars studying music and other disciplines feel that they originally set out to study lesbian, gay, and bisexual people's lives and work, and to begin to address issues of marginalization that many of these people have faced and continue to face today. To these scholars, the term *queer* represents the broadening of a field of study or mode of inquiry to include more general issues of cultural difference, possibly at the expense of a lesbian-, gay-, or bisexual-centered perspective. While the origins of *queer* studies are closely linked with feminist scholarship, *queer* studies in music, as in other disciplines, are rapidly developing into a mode of inquiry distinct from feminist scholarship.

Sex

A person's *sex* is determined by her physical characteristics. Sex is generally thought of in two categories, *female* and *male*. A person's *gender* and *sex* need not necessarily "match"; a person who is biologically *male* might choose to dress and behave as a *woman*. In this case, the person's *sex* would be *male*, while her *gender* would be *woman*.

Sexuality

A person's *sexuality* concerns the *gender* and/or *sex* of people to whom she is attracted. A person attracted primarily to members of the opposite *sex* is heterosexual or straight; a person attracted primarily to members of the same *sex* is gay or lesbian; a person attracted to both males and females is bisexual. The word *queer* can be used as an umbrella term to describe gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, and also transgendered people (people who have chosen to adopt a *gender* that does not coincide with their biological sex) and transsexual people (people who have undergone surgery to change their biological sex).

Woman/Man

The terms *woman* and *man* refer to *genders* of adults. The word *woman* is sometimes spelled *womon*, or *womyn*, with the plural *wimmin* or *womyn*. The words *lady* and *gentleman* have classist connotations and are generally avoided except in contexts where they have a specific meaning or connotation distinct from the words *woman* and *man*.

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So how do feminist theorists apply these terms to music? It's extremely difficult to define feminist scholarship, and some would probably argue that it can't or shouldn't be done. Still, newcomers to the field deserve guidelines of some sort. The following are three aspects of feminist thought that seem to be present in a great deal of recent literature addressing music. While feminist scholarship is by no means limited to any easily definable political or scholarly ideal, these three topics serve as common threads running through a great deal of recent literature in the field.

Academic Feminism's Relationships to Political Feminism

For some scholars, the academic and the political seem to be separated, and for others, they are one in the same. But intersections between the two often figure prominently into discussions among scholars who identify their work as feminist. Some examples of work that expand academia's traditional boundaries can be found in a book edited by Susan Cook and Judy Tsou, *Cecilia Reclaimed*.² The book contains an essay by Venise Berry about images of women in rap music, an essay by Susan Cook on gender issues in American ballads, an essay by Bonny Miller about music in nineteenth-century American women's magazines, and several articles offering various feminist perspectives on art music genres from the Renaissance through the twentieth century.³ In all of these articles, the authors explore how feminist scholarship can address concerns of performers and audiences whose lives traditionally haven't intersected with academia. A great deal of feminist scholarship attempts to examine acknowledged and unacknowledged boundaries inherent in dichotomies such as amateur and professional, art and pop, and academic and political.

Dichotomies or Binarisms

Many feminist scholars focus a great deal of their work on uncovering hierarchical binarisms (female/male, Italian/German, salon music/masterwork) that have existed as unspoken assumptions for ear-

²Cook, Susan C., and Judy S. Tsou, ed., *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives On Gender and Music*, with a Foreword by Susan McClary (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

³Venise T. Berry, "Feminine or Masculine: The Conflicting Images of Female Images in Rap Music," in *Cecilia Reclaimed*, 183; Cook, "'Cursed Was She': Gender and Power in American Balladry," in *Cecilia Reclaimed*, 202; Bonny H. Miller, "'Ladies' Companion, Ladies' Canon?: Women Composers in American Magazines from *Godey's* to the *Ladies' Home Journal*," in *Cecilia Reclaimed*, 156.

lier generations of musicians. Once these binarisms are identified and explained, they can be used to shed light on a certain type of music's relation to a particular culture, as do Susan McClary's writings on Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* and Bizet's *Carmen*;⁴ or they can be turned inside out or upside down to offer a new perspective on musical style or composition like that offered by Suzanne Cusick in her essay, "On a Lesbian Relationship with Music," in which she explores relationships between various "way[s] [which she] prefers to behave": as a church organist, as a teacher, and as a lesbian.⁵ Dichotomies and binarisms seem to be fairly important in feminist scholarship, but important in different ways to different people.

The Desire to Address Anything Which Can Be Associated with Women, Females, or Anything Considered Feminine

This category can apply to an enormous assortment of areas of inquiry, including the study of women composers and musicians, women characters in opera (whether they are or were played by men or women), and types of musical activity that have been gendered feminine in any culture or historical period, like playing the virginal or the flute, or singing lullabies or laments. Examples of scholarly activity in this category would be a music theory professor who uses music by women composers as examples for analysis, a study of mezzo "pants roles," or a study of how junior high school band students' gender relates to their choice of instruments.

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⁴Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

⁵Suzanne G. Cusick, "On a Lesbian Relationship With Music: A Serious Effort Not to Think Straight," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 1994), 67-83; 73.

The ambiguities, contradictions, and ideas in feminist scholarship that seem to resist clear definition can be overwhelming and confusing at first to a newcomer. These ambiguities and resistant ideas are what I love most about feminist scholarship; they are at the very core of what draws me to this sort of work. Everyone who studies gender and sexuality and how they effect our experiences with music—how they cause these experiences to come into being—develops a slightly different interpretation of the meanings and significance of terminology and ideas. The nooks and crannies between differing definitions, and the relationships between many contrasting viewpoints, create a richness, interest, and variety of feminist scholarship. Within these nooks and crannies exists a wealth of possibilities to be incorporated into more traditional music-theoretical studies, and the wide variety of viewpoints represented in feminist scholarship promises to continue producing ever more creative and enlightening approaches to musical analysis. There are no Lysistrata-type ultimatums being issued; feminist ideologies can be adapted by any scholar to examine any aspect of music from Zarlino to Abba, and beyond. There is enough here for everybody to get some.