

Composing Like a Woman?

– On Music, Gender, and Democracy

The phrase "composing like a woman" is likely to arouse resistance and suspicion within women composers. The title raises the question whether there could be a specific female way of composing music, different from that of male composers. The reluctance is understandable. According to the musicologist Susan McClary it has been important to women as a political strategy to demonstrate that they too can write MUSIC, not women's music.¹ They wish to make their gender identities a nonissue precisely because there still remains so many essentialist assumptions about what music by women "ought" to sound like. In order not to resemble the passive ideal of femininity, we have learned how to perform or write *with balls*. Thus, not only do women not have a musical language of their own upon which to rely, but they often have a strong distaste for the idea of gender being an element in their music.

"Composition of music", in this paper, refers to the classical music tradition, contemporary music and avant-garde today, a field which demands a long education and specialization to learn the handcraft and engage in aesthetic reflections. Today, most discussions concerning the low participation rates of women in the field of musical composition, have centered around *equal opportunity*. The idea is that given the same access to training and education, women too will emerge as composers.² The focus has commonly been to discuss cultural habits, and perhaps the lack of historical role models for women composers.

In this presentation I will study the question whether another reason, in addition, could affect the low interest: the musical languages applied.

Music as a Universal Language - The Fear of the Body

There is still a common belief that an artist could tell us something universally true. Music is commonly regarded as a free activity, not historically situated, and not having its basis in anything physical. The idea stems especially from the romantic era of the 19th century, when the composer was regarded as a master, a creative source of the musical work. The still deeper historical roots are to be found in the Western dualism, established in the antique, in Plato's division between the ever changing material world and the world of pure ideas. The ideas of the mind are presented as perfect

1 Susan McClary, 19

2 Susan McClary, 114

and everlasting. There might be something consolating and safe about this approach. The expression “classical music”, which was taken into use in the romantic era, refers to the antique, and it suggests an idealization of that which transcends history, or a specific era. Lydia Goehr writes about Beethoven's 5th symphony: “we recognize the work, if not by its name alone, then by its isolated melodies. Recognizing the melodies—ah, yes, that one!—encourages us to believe the world is in good order. There will always be that opening theme.”³

This universalism is, however, misleading. Music is thoroughly formed by cultural conventions, and musical material is completely historical. For example, functional harmonics as a form of musical progression is not any “product of nature”. It is based on a long cultural development, and the music theory is based on a chromatically tuned piano, which allows free modulations. Not only is the musical material historical, but so are the whole structures around a performance in a concert hall: The audience listens to the performing musicians, and the program is divided in different musical works, where applause appear between each work. This is a convention, which enables a musical work to be perceived *as* a musical work. For example John Cage's work 4'33", where the pianist is about to start playing, but sits still through the piece, is only possible to perceive *as musical silence* in this context of a performance of a musical work.

In other art forms, such as film, visual arts and literature, the “universalism” has been subjected to a feminist critique in the 20th century. According to Susan McClary “it almost seems that musicology managed miraculously to pass directly from pre- to postfeminism without ever having to change.⁴ The codes within music are often taken to be somehow “natural”. For example, “when composing music for female character, a composer may automatically choose traits such as softness or passivity, without really examining the premises for such choices.⁵ The “feminine” is weak, abnormal, and subjective; the “masculine” strong, normal, and objective. Academic disciplines have tried to insist that music is only music, that it cannot *mean* anything else. But in the social world, music achieves these effects all the time.⁶

One of the problems is that the body has been ignored in the western world because it seems to have no role in our reasoning about abstract subject matters.⁷ The tendency to identify with pure mind underlies virtually every aspect of patriarchal Western culture. Music is an interesting medium in that it doesn't seem to be material, or to refer to anything material, while simultaneously it is capable of engaging the body. Since few listeners know how to explain how it creates its effects, music gives the illusion of operating independently of cultural mediation. It is often

3 Lydia Goehr, lii

4 Susan McClary, 5

5 Susan McClary, 9

6 Susan McClary, 21

7 Susan McClary, 24

received as a mysterious medium within which we seem to encounter our “own” most private feelings. Yet very few people are able to explain verbally *how* music affects them.

So, how does the woman composer enter into composition *as a woman*?

The Body Is in the Mind

Historically, there is no separate tradition of women's music. A legitimate question is, to begin with, how it has affected the musical languages that only white males, that is, white male bodies, have participated in defining, composing and forming musical languages?

For example, a harmonic progression through a piece, a harmonic tension which builds up, and in the end releases and turns back to the tonic, has been compared with an orgasm, and more specifically, a male orgasm. How would a musical work sound if there had been only women composers in the romantic era? Would the harmonic development be more complex and sensual, with erogenic spots all over the piece? And, would other aspects peculiar for a female body, like the cycles of periods, be heard in women's music?

This kind of approach to the question appears to be problematic, as it forwards a biological essentialism. In other art forms, like film and visual arts, this was an approach in the early phase of the feminist critique. There was a rising awareness about how the subject behind the camera affects the choice of the object that is filmed, and the aesthetic expression that is created. The “male gaze” is a well known term from the visual arts. Central questions were, whether women had their own visual language, or creativity. For example Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro tried to explore how the female *body* affected the visual arts.⁸ They claimed that a bodily experience could be found in visual languages, through a specific female symbolism. This kind of essentialism can easily be criticized in that defining genders as something natural doesn't really solve problems, and that it operates with a narrow heteronormative understanding of two genders. It doesn't take diversity into consideration. So, should the body be excluded, then? This seems wrong, as well. A composer, or artist, engages in the work process in an extremely sensual way, and it is not only that the body affects the mind, but that the body is *in* the mind. After all, it is necessary for any abstract meaning to have a bodily basis.⁹

Another approach to the physicality, is the way Broudes and Garrards describe biology, not as the anatomy of a female body, but recognizing socialization and gender roles as an essential part of the gender identity. Our bodies, and our ways of reacting, are formed also by the challenges we meet within the roles we receive from the society. In this case, the question doesn't only concern

8 Sigrun Åsebø, 261

9 Susan McClary, 24

genders, but it comes to concern all kinds of cultural and social backgrounds. Thus, the question of narrow representation rates within the field of composition doesn't only concern gender, but touches the issue of democracy in a wider sense.

However, there are still problems about choosing a multitude of types of bodies as the origin of music, if this leads to thinking that the problem would be solved solely by engaging a larger range of genders, cultures, and social backgrounds in the field. As a composer, one can't step outside of existing musics and create one's own musical language, independent of all the existing codes. Through the culture, and through our educations, we have received the field of music, and everything we do within music, is somehow reacting on these norms. How, then, could women participate without unwillingly reproducing the ideologies that are immanent in music? It is not possible to choose a position outside the norms. This we know also from languages. For example, political censorship often consolidates that ideological content it is trying to resist. Thus, to ask what a women's music would be like, or to change the music, is a more complex task which deals with possibilities of reacting on norms.

Judith Butler: Construction of Norms

For Butler, gender is not something that *is*, but something that is being *done*, or *performed*. The biological gender is for Butler a discursive category. It doesn't refer to anything natural or given as such, but the use of the word "biological" has its specific historical origin and development. Butler doesn't claim that a biological body doesn't exist, only that any representation of it only becomes understandable for us through the contours created through the discourse. Simultaneously language conceals this origin, and words like "body", the "material", the "biological gender" and the "natural" appear as "common sense". They are presented as if they were something prelingual.¹⁰

While several constructivists employ a similar approach to language, what is interesting about Butler, is that according to her, norms are formed *through* the act of performing them. She takes further J.L. Austin's theory of linguistic acts, and claims that repetition of an expression, is what actually forms the meaning. The performing brings into the world what it calls out. Performative expressions are built on an institutional practice, a law which can be quoted.¹¹ Repetition is actually quoting. Butler mentions "girling" as one example. Finding out that a pregnant woman is expecting a girl, shouting out "it's a girl!", one has already attached a lot of cultural meaning and expectations to the situation. The norm doesn't appear from one simple event, but it has to be repeated, for it to make sense. To base the act of saying something on repetition, is

10 Kari Jegerstedt, 75

11 Kari Jegerstedt, 77

to base it on a quote: to quote a norm.¹²

Composition of music is also widely based on quoting norms. One needs to know the tradition to some degree, to be able to react on it. “Tacit knowledge”, as an epistemological concept, describes the non explicit ways in which knowledge is approached in musical composition: it can't solely be taught through books, or verbal contents. One can simply learn it by being a part of a practice, by imitating one's teacher and other composers, by repeating the norms. Repeating *the ways in which* the field is discussed. For Butler, to speak of repetition, includes that it is never identical with the original expression. True repetition is impossible. In this sense the repetition already marks a difference.¹³

According to Butler, one can't willingly step outside the norm, or break with it in a specific way. Just as little as one can step outside of genders and choose one's own gender. The subject can't rule the process. What one can do, is to try to *denaturalize* concepts that seem to be prelingual, and thus open up to a wider understanding. According to Butler, one needs new critical readings, or allegoric readings of texts, that reveal the norms that are repeated.

The view of Butler, among several other possible views, contributes to the discussion by *denaturalizing* the assumption of universality in music. To make the field of music more democratic, one needs not only to focus on bringing in a larger variety of subjects, but also on a critique of musical languages. But, is there any further benefit from gender studies?

Problems about Applying Gender Theory to Musical Composition as Such

Judith Butler's careful suggestion about “new types of readings” as a solution to denaturalizing the norms that forward specific gender-based attitudes, seems somehow passive when applied to the field of musical composition. It doesn't seem intuitively applicable. However, the insufficiency is difficult to problematize by making any counterclaim. The question is perhaps in which *order* to approach the encounter between gender studies and artistic practice. In this case, using gender studies to explore what is possible to do, when forwarding a more equal representation of genders in musical composition. One of the problems about the way in which theoretical claims are applied is that they sometimes leave the connection between claim and phenomena – theory and practice – more disconnected than connected.¹⁴ The situation might be similar to reading an interpretations of an artwork, that tries to capture the spirit or the content. As Susan Sontag writes in her essay *Against Interpretation*: “Real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its

12 Kari Jegerstedt, 83

13 Kari Jegerstedt, 83

14 Lydia Goehr, 285

content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, comfortable.”¹⁵ One would think that if there is an area in the society that could critically *reflect on* the society, without making counterclaims that would only consolidate the terminologies, it would be found within the contemporary arts.

Regarding composition as solely acting on norms, presupposes a musical work to be a passive product of the composer as the creative subject. But a musical work is not passive. A musical work *speaks back* to the composer in the process. The process of composition is messy, non-linear, and surprising. Form and material intertwine in complex ways, and reveal new possibilities throughout the whole process. The tiniest choices have enormous consequences for the rest of the composition. It is not repetition of a norm in any pure or strict sense, neither is it standing outside of norms. Composition is an activity where one engages with different tools and musical materials, possibly through a dialogue with the an ensemble, exploring the cultural context through the choices one makes, and employing a very sensual and intuitive understanding of timing and intimacy. Composition is bringing all these aspects together to an uncontrollable, messy whole of methods, impressions and ideas. The process could be called a “musical porridge”, in the sense that in a porridge the ingredients melt together in an irreversible way. The new possibilities have already revealed themselves and one can't go backwards in the process of realizing what is possible. Theory and analysis of what's being done can only come *after* a sphere has already been opened. This kind of activity is more directed at a not-knowing, or a not-yet-knowing, the realization that we do not yet know what we don't know. According to Andrew Bowie this not-knowing is almost constitutive for music, which we never understand in a definitive discursive manner, it is worth taking seriously the idea that such non-understanding might be philosophically very significant.¹⁶

The question should perhaps be reversed: What could gender studies learn from the method of musical composition? Instead of engaging in an everlasting conversation about whether gender is biologically or culturally determined, one could focus on the *creation* of women and men. How about being in a continuous process of composing genders? Both by becoming aware of the social roles received from the society, and by performing in the actual, concrete world in a polyphonic and multi-dimensional way?

The Democracy of the Field of Musical Composition. What Can We Do?

Returning to the problem of the low representation rates of women in musical composition, we should first acknowledge the importance of equal participation. Avant-garde performs as a critical voice in the society, as a countervoice to popular culture, and it can enrich the society by

¹⁵ Susan Sontag, 8

¹⁶ Andrew Bowie, 11

problematizing established facts.¹⁷ For a democratic society it is important to forward a wide representation of genders and different social backgrounds in the field of new music.

One important task is to forward the anti-universalist attitude to composition. There is a continuous danger, and tendency, of music to become an intellectual construction which acts as though it didn't reflect anything outside of it, ignoring both the society and the physical body as the precondition for its existence. The work of art is not only situated in the society, but one should pay attention to *the society in the work of art*. The work of art is not only created *by* a physical human being, but the *body is in the work of art*.

In a sense music needs to be a negative activity to challenge established forms. Susan McClary writes: "So long as music reaffirms what everyone expects, it can manage to seem apolitical, to serve as a mere frill. But as soon as it transgresses some deep-stated taboo, it can bring boiling to the surface certain antagonisms or alliances that otherwise might not have been so passionately articulated."¹⁸ The critical potential is already present in avant-garde. But there are several ways to forward a deeper, more contextualizing understanding within the field. The pedagogic strategies at musical institutions, for example, could be more focused on wide aesthetic reflections, not only teaching the handcrafts of historical styles as given facts. Also, the repertoires of orchestral institutions, that often seem to serve as museums of classical works, should become more focused on being *artistic institutions*, that stand in an active dialogue with the contemporary society. The romantic repertoire maintains specific structures around musical works and musical languages, and specific paradigms concerning what kind of a "master" the composer ought to be.

Finally, an important task for any composer is to trust that their own reactions to music are legitimate. Suzanne Cuzick writes in her essay "On a Lesbian Relationship with Music - A Serious Effort Not to Think Straight": "*Like good sex*, [music] is an experience that re-teaches me how to relate to the world, how to have the nerve to open myself to it."¹⁹ It is scary to take one's reactions seriously, as they often feel very private and even primitive. Also, the reactions should not be studied *as* private, or subjective. As Susan McClary claims, one should examine the semiotics of desire, arousal, and sexual pleasure that circulate in the public sphere through music.²⁰ Studying one's reactions, too, *is* studying the norms of the society. Engaging in the field of musical composition through one's own "situatedness", *is* engaging in the field of music. It is to take one's own "voice" seriously, which is necessary for any well-functioning democracy.

17 Maja Ratkje, 34

18 Susan McClary, 27

19 Suzanne Cuzick, 75

20 Susan McClary, 9

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