

Addressing the Problem of Criticism in Feminist Musicology (1979–2015); or, Why We Shouldn't Raise the White Flag Yet

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Yet despite the ferocity of such responses to feminist music criticism, too many scholars – men as well as women – now entered into this prohibited terrain for the old status quo to return. Musicology's foundations have shifted; the discipline will never be the same again.
– McClary, 1993¹

For all the triumph of the last twenty years, our ship has been anchored in that quiet harbor perhaps a bit too long. Despite those voices that will warn you not to tip the boat over, that you are cradled in a discipline of love and devotion, we need another wave to push feminist music studies to the next level.
– McClary, 2011/2012²

In the early 1990s, feminism was at the forefront of what was, in every sense, a critical time for musicology. It is therefore worth questioning why, 20 years later, the study seems to have stagnated. It exists and persists, and yet the conversations have become scarce, static and isolated within the general discipline; feminism in musicology became literally and metaphorically confined to a single shelf in the library and to itself; McClary's "quiet harbor."³ The comparative absence of rallying cries has not gone unnoticed in the musicological community, but for too long has gone without action.⁴ Analysing the core components of feminist musicology, the progression the discipline took and the path it might yet take will be

¹ Susan McClary, "Reshaping a Discipline: Musicology and Feminism in the 1990s," *Feminist Studies* 19 (1993): 416.

² Susan McClary, "Making Waves: Opening Keynote for the Twentieth Anniversary of the Feminist Theory and Music Conference," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 16 (2012): 96.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Sally Macarthur, *Towards a Twenty-First-Century Feminist Politics of Music* (repr., 2010; Farnham, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 105.

crucial to the discipline's survival: in particular, it is necessary to re-examine the role of criticism.

Broadly speaking, feminist scholarship in musicology falls into three categories: research into female composers neglected by the Western art canon ("canonic research"), new-musicological style criticism ("criticism"), and self-reflective discussion about the field ("metadiscourse"). Reviewing the history of these three categories shows that while the feminist musicological movement began with a desire to incorporate more female composers into the Western music canon, and succeeded in establishing a canon of female composers, criticism came to occupy a paradoxically crucial and destructive position in the literature. It led to rapid progress, but away from the central canonic problem – the absence of female composers – and in doing so created a field of study that was first and foremost antagonistic to "normal" musicology.⁵ Re-examining the role of this problematic category of feminist research may allow for the reconsideration and remedy of the feminist musicological path. It is not enough for a female canon and a feminist body of scholarship to exist if they never become curriculum or public knowledge; it is not progress if these ideas fall to obscurity. Redressing the problems raised by the category of criticism may be one method of achieving the sustained relevance of feminism in contemporary musicological discussion.

As the absence of study on female composers began to be questioned, mid-twentieth-century feminist theory began working its way into the musicological discourse.⁶ Change was driven by the formation of societies dedicated to these interests (such as the International Alliance for Women in Music in 1994), the founding of specifically gender-focused conferences (including the Feminist Theory and Music Conferences in 1991), and the publication of comprehensive and influential texts dealing with these issues.⁷ Susan McClary's *Feminine Endings* (1991) and Marcia Citron's *Gender and the Musical Canon* (1993), in particular, were accompanied by rallying calls to action and optimistic predictions regarding the influence and

⁵ Macarthur, *Feminist Politics of Music*, 50, 106.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷ International Alliance for Women in Music, 2013, accessed January 14, 2017, <http://iawm.org/about-us/>; McClary, "Making Waves," 86.

future of feminist musicology. But just as critical feminist musicology flourished as a result of engagement with canonic research and out of interdisciplinary studies, it also coincided with the demise of concepts such as “gender” in the broader area of women’s studies.⁸ Gender in particular underwent a distinct shift from being viewed as a “binary” and “natural” concept to being viewed as a multifaceted and socially constructed one. Thus the existence of femininity itself was called into question, a poststructuralist shift that meant methods which aimed to view music and/or musical discourse through the lens of feminist theory and investigations into the extent to which music itself was gendered – such as those by Susan McClary or Carolyn Abbate – became obsolete in the context of general feminist studies. They therefore had little impact on the gender studies community, while the musicological community immediately had arguments of essentialism at their disposal.⁹

Criticism thus became the turning point for feminist musicology, increasing the focus on the problems it created. This primarily occurred the more McClary’s work came to be seen as emblematic of the field. Her success in bringing feminism into the discipline conflicted with the frequency with which she was, and is, used as the paramount example of it, leading to the neglect of the canonic research category within the disciplinary conception of “feminist musicology.” Debates then became increasingly metadiscursive, a trend which continued into the twenty-first century. Debates over the future of the discipline, such as between Ruth Solie and Pieter van den Toorn (1991), became a twenty-first-century reluctance to engage with an issue if no solutions could be found. Critical feminist discussions turned away from their original focus, relegating feminist musicological discussion to obscurity or minutia. Understanding the intricacies of these ideological shifts is a significant step towards both the reinvigoration and refocusing of the feminist musicological debate.

⁸ Sally Hines, “Feminist Theories,” in *Introducing Gender and Women’s Studies*, 3rd ed., ed. Diane Richardson and Victoria Robinson (Hampshire, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 23–4.

⁹ McClary, “Making Waves,” 92.

Early Trends in Feminist Musicology

Criticism in feminist musicology emerged almost simultaneously from responses to canonic research and from responses to Joseph Kerman's call for "criticism" in musicology. Feminism in musicology began with the goal of incorporating more female composers into music studies, but it was criticism that brought this study into the musicological spotlight. That is to say musicological feminist criticism can be seen as having emerged in response to canonic research. Canonic research itself branches into detailed studies of individual female composers (for example Cécile Chaminade or Ruth Crawford Seeger), general overviews of the place of women in the Western art canon (exemplified by a number of anthologies detailing the lives and work of numerous female composers), and writings with a more sociological focus on the roles of women as performers and patrons within historical musical societies. Examples of each of these types of canonic research are detailed in Appendix 1, which demonstrates the consistency of canonic work. However, although these studies gradually began to permeate "narrative histories" of the canon in general, female composers did not achieve wider recognition until studies began to critically investigate their work.¹⁰ Elizabeth Wood's 1980 essay "Women in Music" is often considered the first response to canonic research, as she surveyed the surge of research into female composers that had occurred during the 1970s and called for its intensification and continuation into the realm of "the new feminist scholarship."¹¹

From Wood's essay onwards, increasing engagement with feminist theory transformed a field previously dominated by canonic research into one dominated by criticism. Sally Macarthur has noted that criticism began to develop in musicology in the 1980s as a result of writers combining their canonic research with close readings of the music itself, "[attempting] to link the music to the composer, suggesting its embodiment by the composer gives rise to its aesthetic difference."¹² They argued that the music *was* aesthetically different,

¹⁰ Several female composers have gradually been incorporated into J. Peter Burkholder et. al., *A History of Western Music*, 9th ed. (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2014), 64, 611–3.

¹¹ Elizabeth Wood, "Women in Music," *Signs* 6 (1980): 295–7; McClary, "Reshaping a Discipline," 399–400.

¹² Macarthur, *Feminist Politics of Music*, 96.

not due to an arbitrary lack of skill of the composer, but due to their identity as women – a methodology exemplified by Marcia Citron’s examination of Cécile Chaminade’s *Piano Sonata* (Op. 21), in which she questioned whether there was interaction between gendered conceptions of sonata-form themes and female perspective.¹³ Citron considered the possibility of “women’s style” to be “fundamental to questions about how music becomes part of the canon” yet also highlights the difficulty of defining this style, owing to the dangers of essentialism.¹⁴ Questioning whether there were inherently male qualities in the existing canon was therefore equally important in the disciplinary progression towards critical feminist musicology. McClary has also argued that criticism with any political focus needed to come into existence because “the alternative... is to accept without question... the works of the canon.”¹⁵ McClary and Citron both investigated the existing canon in order to question the perception of its contents as “normal” or “universal,” with the goal of returning to issues of a female musical aesthetic.

The development of feminist criticism was also supported by the fact that criticism, defined by Joseph Kerman as “the study of the meaning and value of artworks,” was itself burgeoning in the 80s.¹⁶ The political came to occupy a natural space in musicology, and therefore it is possible to see feminist musicology as having also emerged from the realms of gender and literary studies. In the 1970s, Second Wave feminism, (which is often coupled with the label “radical feminism”) emphasised the idea of a “universal patriarchy” and focused on violence as the perceived method of oppression.¹⁷ The idea of the “patriarchy as universal,” of male values being portrayed as the norm, then found its way into disciplines such as film and literature studies, where the intention was not to destroy but to expose oppressive texts, and to discuss and teach them as such.¹⁸

¹³ Macarthur, *Feminist Politics of Music*, 95–6.

¹⁴ Marcia J. Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 120–1, 163–4.

¹⁵ McClary, “Reshaping a Discipline,” 408–9.

¹⁶ Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), 15–17.

¹⁷ Hines, “Feminist Theories,” 21–2.

¹⁸ McClary, “Making Waves,” 92; Lillian S. Robinson, “Treason our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon,” in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays*

For instance, the implications of female power “invariably articulated as linguistic transgression” became a central theme of feminist Shakespearean studies.¹⁹ In musicology, Catherine Clément widened this trend to opera in her monograph *Opera; or the Undoing of Women*, identifying herself as engaging with music, but working in a literary sphere.²⁰

It is therefore possible to see Clément’s work as bridging the established, radical feminist literary ideas and the burgeoning ideas of criticism in musicology, particularly as most of the work that followed hers contained an operatic focus. Clément provided gendered readings of more than 20 nineteenth- and twentieth-century operas and categorised them into different types of oppression or societal roles. One of the more notable is her chapter “Dead Women,” in which she draws attention to the frequency with which women die in opera. From her analyses of *Cio-Cio-San*, *Carmen*, and *Isolde*, she concluded “by some means or other, they cross over a rigorous, invisible line, the line that makes them unbearable; so they will have to be punished.”²¹ Clément provided a viable platform on which musicologists could, and would, build. In the foreword to the English translation of Clément’s monograph (a foreword which went on to become the third chapter of *Feminine Endings*) Susan McClary drew on Clément’s readings for ideas that could be applied to absolute music.²² In the early 90s, Carolyn Abbate notably opposed herself to Clément’s argument, contending that opera’s reliance on women’s voices to create music makes them not oppressed, but powerful

on women, literature and theory, ed. Elaine Showalter (London, Virago Press: 1986), 107–108.

¹⁹ William C. Carroll, “The Virgin Not: Language and Sexuality in Shakespeare,” in *Shakespeare and Gender: A History*, ed. Deborah E. Barker and Ivo Kamps (London and New York: Verso, 1995), 184, quoted in Phyllis Rackin, “Misogyny is Everywhere,” in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Dymphna Callaghan (Massachusetts and Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 44.

²⁰ Catherine Clément, *Opera; or the Undoing of Women* (repr., 1988; London: Virago Press, 1989), 12–3, 56–7. Originally published in French, 1979.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

²² Susan McClary, “The Undoing of Opera: Toward a Feminist Criticism of Music,” in Clément, *Opera; or the Undoing of Women*. In particular, see McClary’s discussion of chromaticism, xiii–xv; Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 53–79 (Chapter 3, “Sexual Politics in Classical Music”).

components of the genre, using analysis and interpretation of works such as *Götterdämmerung* and *Salome* to support this view.²³ The 90s and early 2000s also saw collections emerge dedicated to concerns of gender and opera such as Corinne Blackmer and Patricia Smith's *En Travesti* (1995) and Mary Ann Smart's *Siren Songs* (2000), both of which engaged with each category of feminist musicological writing but focused on critically reading feminism into venerated works and composers.²⁴ Criticism therefore led to a fruitful combination of musicology and gender studies, one which inspired a large body of work dedicated to uncovering patriarchal values in music, but which drew critical musicology away from canonic concerns.

The Demise of Criticism: Causes and Explanations

Examples of this type of criticism have been much more scarce in the twenty-first century. Female-focused critical analysis has been subsumed into either purely canonic research, or a wider critical interpretation of difference, the result being a dearth of progress in feminist musicology. This is most evident in the fact that although feminist research has continued, measurable progress has been glacial. Statistics would in fact indicate that feminist research has had an almost negligible effect on bringing female-composed music into (Western) concert halls.²⁵ In Western musicology, research with a discovery focus has continued in canonic studies as well as politically and philosophically inflected studies of known female composers. For example, Aisling Kenny and Susan Wollenberg's volume *Women*

²³ Carolyn Abbate, "Opera; or, the Envoicing of Women," *Musicology and Difference*, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 248–55; Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung voices* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), ix, 243–9.

²⁴ Examples include: Judith A. Peraino, "I am an Opera: Identifying with Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*," in *En Travesti: Women, Gender, Subversion, Opera*, ed. Corinne E. Blackmer and Patricia Juliana Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 99–131; Margaret Reynolds, "Ruggiero's Deceptions, Cherubino's Distractions," in *En Travesti: Women, Gender, Subversion, Opera*, ed. Corinne E. Blackmer and Patricia Juliana Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 132–151; Mary Ann Smart, "Ulterior Motives: Verdi's Recurring Themes Revisited," in *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera* ed. Mary Ann Smart (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), 135–159.

²⁵ Macarthur, *Feminist Politics of Music*, 25–27, surveys empirical studies into the prominence of female-composed music.

and the Nineteenth Century Lied (2015) addresses the importance of the Lied as a respectable yet accessible genre for nineteenth-century women. The volume contains a number of essays that begin to link female-composed Lieder with biographical details; a crucial step which begins to integrate these composers with their male counterparts.²⁶ For example, Kadja Grönke's chapter "Contrasting Concepts of Love in Two Songs by Alma Schindler(-Mahler) and Gustav Mahler" contains analyses of one Lied by each composer and then undertakes a comparison between them. This methodology opens the discussion to concerns of Schindler-Mahler's life both prior to and following her marriage.²⁷ A female focus is thus present, including an increased focus on female compositional output, however, analysis still takes place in the looming context of the composer's marriage and her "emotional state." The result is the impression that her music is unable to stand on its own, while the absence of 1990s-style "feminist" reading, in which the music is linked in turn with feminist theory, disguises these still present assumptions. The challenge is in balancing an increased focus on female output with the separation of "women" as a distinct, and therefore secondary, category.

Another factor affecting the decline of criticism has been that criticism itself has changed with the advance of the twenty-first century, especially in regard to its approach to, and definition of, difference. *Rethinking Difference in Music Scholarship*, published in late 2014, revisited "criticism" in the 1990s sense by interrogating the value of particular works and genres in the context of their social implications. This is exemplified in essays such as Melanie Lowe's discussion of Haydn in the Enlightenment, in which she argues that Haydn's "music tacitly endorses the hegemony of existing social structures while nodding subtly towards their dissolution," and Heather Hadlock's "Different Masculinities: Androgyny, Effeminacy

²⁶ Aisling Kenny and Susan Wollenberg, "Introduction," in *Women and the Nineteenth Century Lied*, ed. Aisling Kenny and Susan Wollenberg (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 2. See also in this volume parts II and III on "Individual Composers and Their Lieder."

²⁷ Kadja Grönke, "Contrasting Concepts of Love in Two Songs by Alma Schindler(-Mahler) and Gustav Mahler," in *Women and the Nineteenth Century Lied* ed. Aisling Kenny and Susan Wollenberg (Surrey: Ashgate, 2015), 217–229.

and Sentiment in Rossini's *La donna del lago*," which follows the Clément tradition by turning the focus to effeminate male characters in opera.²⁸ But these discussions have begun to deal with difference as a wider concept, gender becoming "an integrated element of other topical discussions rather than an independent focus."²⁹ "Feminism" as it originally existed is now answerable to wider, intersectional, critical discussions. Olivia Bloechl and Melanie Lowe also cite a move away from "recognition" and "difference-based" critique in their introduction to *Rethinking Difference*, but a move away from a binary conception of "gender" has also played a significant role.³⁰

Moving away from specifically "feminist" discourses has, paradoxically, been a hallmark of twenty-first-century feminism, and one that set critical feminist musicology up to be viewed as oppositional, both at its height and today. Beginning in the early 90s, poststructural and postmodern feminists started to question constructed gender binaries and the extent to which feminism essentialised female experience to the perspectives of white, middle class, heterosexual women.³¹ Judith Butler began to instigate changes when she advocated in *Gender Trouble* for an "apparently voluntarist approach to identity" in which gender roles were seen as culturally enforced, not naturally occurring.³² At the time, this school of feminist thought clashed with the rise of criticism in musicology, and provided an instantaneous counter-argument to the musicologist's

²⁸ Melanie Lowe, "Difference and Enlightenment in Haydn's Instrumental Music," in *Rethinking Difference in Music Scholarship*, ed. Olivia Bloechl, Melanie Lowe, and Jeffrey Kallberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 134; Heather Hadlock, "Different masculinities: androgyny, effeminacy and sentiment in Rossini's *La donna del lago*," in *Rethinking Difference in Music Scholarship*, 170.

²⁹ Olivia Bloechl and Melanie Lowe, "Introduction: Rethinking Difference," in *Rethinking Difference in Music Scholarship*, 3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 47–8; Macarthur, *Feminist Politics of Music*, 39; Hadlock, "Different masculinities," 171.

³¹ Hines, "Feminist Theories," 24–6.

³² Kaye Mitchell, "Unintelligible Subjects: Making sense of Gender, Sexuality and Subjectivity After Butler," *Subjectivity* 25 (2008): 422; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (repr., 1990; New York and London: Routledge, 2010) 10–17; Ruth Solie, "Introduction: On Difference," in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 18–9.

methods.³³ Leo Treitler, for example, argued in his chapter from *Musicology and Difference* that feminist criticism, including McClary's discussion of Beethoven's Ninth, had become "an exploitation of the *idea* of gender difference in the service of political and ideological agendas for music history and criticism."³⁴ He also discusses the inseparability of concerns of race and sexuality from those of gender.³⁵

Essentialism is a crucial part of discussions which problematise identity politics, and for feminism it became an issue as soon as the possibility of a distinctively female way of writing began to be discussed.³⁶ The feminist community could do little with the stir being created in musicology, while the musicological community was able to utilise arguments based on concepts such as essentialism to move on from critical feminist musicology almost as soon as it began.³⁷ In the modern era, feminism has become a divided discourse. Psychological studies have observed everyday public opinions of feminism (particularly among young people) as split into "fair" and "unreasonable," the latter version of feminism neglecting intersectional concerns or male perspectives, or being itself "unfeminine."³⁸ The critical work done in musicology is therefore still open to critique and disdain, now that it is being judged by the values of a new generation. A steering away from a sole focus on feminism, as well as attempts to alleviate these problems are clear in texts such as *Rethinking Difference*, but it is this over-analysis of the field itself that has largely led away from the canonic problems feminist musicology originally sought to address.

³³ McClary, "Making Waves," 93; Leo Treitler, "Gender and Other Dualities of Music History," in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, 43–5.

³⁴ Treitler, "Other Dualities," 43.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 44–5.

³⁶ Citron, *Musical Canon*, 159.

³⁷ Macarthur, *Feminist Politics of Music*, 98, 104; McClary, "Making Waves," 92–3.

³⁸ Octavia Calder-Dawe and Nicola Gavey, "Jekyll and Hyde Revisited: Young People's Constructions of Feminism, Feminists and the Practice of 'Reasonable Feminism,'" *Feminism and Psychology* 26 (2016): 503–4.

The McClary Dilemma and Criticisms of Feminist Criticism

Difficulties in establishing critical feminist musicology as a viable discipline can thus be seen to stem from both the time and manner of its development; it sprang into existence as a problematic, paradoxical field, in which wider theoretical goals in gender studies (namely rapid progress towards intersectionality) did not line up with the musicological aim of drawing attention to traits inherent in female-composed works, nor musicology's prominent Western focus.³⁹ When this was combined with reactionary responses in the musicological community, it therefore led to a stamping down of critical feminist aims rather than a productive discourse. That is, the problems with feminist criticism in musicology were often identified not for the purpose of solving them, but rather to support arguments concerning the irrelevance of the study. Feminist musicology itself did not necessarily become irrelevant, but the arguments against criticism halted critical readings of female-composed works and came to encompass and refute feminist musicology as a whole.

Susan McClary stands as the quintessential example of this phenomenon; her work was irrefutably effective at inspiring a productive discourse, but came to polarise the musicological community. Thus, the discussions turned from the composers she was studying to metadiscussions about how she was studying them. Mary Ann Smart has affirmed: "Almost anyone writing about music and gender since... *Feminine Endings* must count as a daughter (or son) of McClary's."⁴⁰ McClary's work, in particular her readings of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, Schubert's Unfinished Symphony and *Carmen*, earned her notoriety in the early 1990s. As Richard Taruskin has noted, "Her primary tactic... was to aim her righteous guns at the most sanctified repertoires in the academic canon, forcing on her

³⁹ On the 1992 emergence of intersectionality as a concept in gender studies see: Helma Lutz, Maria Teresa Herrar Vivar, and Linda Supik, "Framing Intersectionality: An Introduction," in *Framing Intersectionality: Debates on a Multi-Faceted Concept in Gender Studies*, ed. Helma Lutz, Maria Teresa Herrar Vivar, and Linda Supik (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), 1–4.

⁴⁰ Mary Ann Smart, "Introduction," in *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera*, ed. Mary Ann Smart (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), 6.

readers a collision between aesthetic and ethical values.”⁴¹ That is to say she applied her controversial readings, such as the infamous metaphorical association of Beethoven’s Ninth with rape, to beloved works, provoking explosions of discussion as people were forced to reconcile their affinity for the music with their opposition to rape. *Feminine Endings* brought together her most controversial critical articles, putting “feminist scholarship on the musicological map” and quickly leading to her academic canonisation as the paradigmatic musicological feminist critic.⁴² This was demonstrated in various ways, an example being the addition of a subsection entitled “feminist perspectives” to the second edition of *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents* “because McClary’s work [had] indeed permanently altered the critical discourse with respect to some of the most basic defining characteristics of the ‘Western’ musical tradition.”⁴³ In light of this academic reverence, it is fair to credit McClary with bringing feminist musicology into mainstream discussions. While others may have been doing similar work, her intensely polemical approach combined with her invigorating writing style forced the importance of combining gender studies with musicology.

Inadvertently, however, this led to McClary becoming the embodiment of feminist musicology, creating the illusion that “feminism” could be critiqued in its entirety simply by picking apart McClary’s work. When Leo Treitler discussed “the new domain of feminist criticism,” he only critiqued McClary.⁴⁴ Similarly, when Pieter Van den Toorn in “Politics, Feminism and Music Theory,” arrived at his proclamation that “The interests of feminism are best served... in practical, down-to-earth terms” he does so only on the refutation of McClary’s alignment of music with sex.⁴⁵ In these cases McClary was not critiqued as a singular feminist scholar, but as the frontline

⁴¹ Richard Taruskin, “Material Gains: Assessing Susan McClary,” *Music and Letters* 90 (2009): 454.

⁴² Macarthur, *Feminist Politics of Music*, 101; Suzanne Cusick, “On Susan McClary, Gracie Allen, and Cigars,” *Gay & Lesbian Study Group Newsletter* (March, 1992), 16.

⁴³ Taruskin, “Material Gains,” 462; Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson Schirmer, 2008), 523–30.

⁴⁴ Treitler, “Other Dualities,” 36.

⁴⁵ Pieter van den Toorn, “Politics, Feminism and Contemporary Music Theory,” *The Journal of Musicology* 9 (1991): 280–95.

representative of feminist musicological values. As Suzanne Cusick noted, this made it extraordinarily difficult for feminist musicologists to draw on McClary's work or engage with the ideas she proposed.⁴⁶ It is conceivable that this has resulted in the remainder of feminist research being overlooked. "Disproving McClary" or challenging the validity of feminism as a field of study in musicology undercuts the debates that were previously inspired by attempts to incorporate women into the canon, especially those surrounding the potential aesthetic difference of female-composed music. For example, the infamous McClary chapter that referred to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was not really about Beethoven at all, but rather took place in the context of an article searching for female compositional style in Janika Vandervelde's piece *Genesis II*. The fact that the musicological response was to focus on her criticism of the existing canon is all the more revealing.⁴⁷ McClary's tactic, as outlined above by Taruskin, achieved its goal: for a brief time feminism became a mainstream topic in musicology. However, this came at the cost of the ideals of feminist musicology, particularly an appreciation for canonic research, as well as, eventually, any secure place in the discourse.⁴⁸

A focus on the oppositional nature of critical feminism led to a focus on its problems, resulting in a field dominated by metadiscourse. Reactions such as Van den Toorn's became emotionally charged discourses in themselves: Van den Toorn took McClary to task not for essentialising women, but for essentialising men, arguing that McClary "reduces [man] to his sexual needs."⁴⁹ This point is significantly undermined by his dismissal of the idea that women exist as an oppressed class and "can claim no special virtue by reason of their self-proclaimed oppressed status."⁵⁰

Ruth Solie responded to Van den Toorn with the argument that "[his] critique is a little short on real familiarity with feminist

⁴⁶ Cusick, "On Susan McClary," 16; Treitler, "Other Dualities," 35–43; Charles Rosen "Music à la Mode," *The New York Review of Books* (1994): 57–60.

⁴⁷ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 114–116.

⁴⁸ A further evaluation of feminism that reveals a disdain for canonic research comes from Charles Rosen (Charles Rosen "Music à la Mode," 57–60) who embarks on a lengthy and justified critique of McClary, only to finish by criticising the calibre of female composers being studied.

⁴⁹ Van den Toorn, "Politics, Feminism," 292.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 299; Ruth Solie, "What Do Feminists Want? A Reply to Pieter van den Toorn," *The Journal of Musicology* 9 (1991): 409.

scholarship; perhaps he's just too angry with Susan McClary to read any more of it."⁵¹ Solie's response also drew a line between feminist *criticism* and Van den Toorn's call for *analysis*, arguing that as "practitioners of theory in the literary, feminist or cultural sense explicitly reject the formalist and autonomist assumptions that are common in the realms of 'music theory,'" it is incorrect to attempt to force them together.⁵² In response to Van den Toorn's views on oppression, Solie reiterated the political importance of feminist criticism: that feminism is studied because victimisation (for example rape or widespread violence) must be a result of perceived cultural norms and if we can understand those norms, we can begin to solve wider societal problems.⁵³ As Marcia Citron noted, this exchange between Van den Toorn and Solie was a new type of disagreement, one centred on opinions regarding the future of the discipline, rather than disputing musicological "facts."⁵⁴ Regarding the work of McClary, Solie took the same position as Cusick, advocating for a debate that would "soon take shape around McClary's work... to do with the degree to which she is seen to essentialise gender or (to the contrary) to historicise and critique the musical-semiotic processes she discusses."⁵⁵ This debate eventuated. However, compounded by the progress in gender studies (as discussed above with regard to *Rethinking Difference*) it led not to progress beyond McClary but the stagnation and retreat of critical feminism from musicology.

More tempered recent disputes demonstrate that discipline-oriented, problem-focused questions remain the core of arguments, at the expense of progress. For example, in the 2008 *Women and Music*, Judy Lochhead argued for caution in the use of terms such as "sublime" and "ineffable," arguing they may carry and "mask sedimented gender binaries."⁵⁶ In the same issue, James Currie argued that while a postmodern musicological ideal would consist of recognition of every linguistic bias encountered, it is impractical and

⁵¹ Solie, "A Reply to Pieter van den Toorn," 405.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 402.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 409.

⁵⁴ Citron, *Musical Canon*, 198.

⁵⁵ Solie, "A Reply to Pieter van den Toorn," 407.

⁵⁶ Judy Lochhead, "The Sublime, the Ineffable, and Other Dangerous Aesthetics," *Women & Music* 12 (2008): 72.

restrictive to attempt to do so.⁵⁷ Thus the potential of criticism is undone in discourse by its inability to currently solve every problem; conflicts between drives to objectivity and the inherently political are still not resolved. Rather than leading to mainstream engagement with feminist theory as advocated by Solie, the arguments inspired by critical feminist musicology and particularly by McClary led to inactivity in the discipline, a phenomenon which has also been noted by Suzanne Cusick, Sally Macarthur and, to some extent, Charles Rosen.⁵⁸ The critique of so vital and interdisciplinary a field should not result in its obsolescence, and indeed feminist research continues. But if it is to re-emerge with the vitality it once embodied, both McClary and criticism as a whole must become the foundation from which we expand and on which we build.⁵⁹

Potential for a Path Forward

Criticism has been consistently problematic for feminist musicology, but this does not mean it is unnecessary. Practitioners of canonic research in feminist musicology have argued that the formation of a female canon is necessary for female composers to identify with.⁶⁰ However, this neglects the fact that many students of Western musicology today are still raised on the male-centric canon, rendering it their only conception of Western art music. The existence of a female canon also risks marginalising other minority groups; “women” still exist as a social group, but the perpetuation of an exclusively female canon is no more beneficial than the perpetuation of an exclusively male one.⁶¹ Thus it is nowadays important to

⁵⁷ James Robert Currie, “Garden Disputes: Postmodern Beauty and the Sublime Neighbor,” *Women & Music* 12 (2008): 83–6.

⁵⁸ Cusick, “On Susan McClary,” 16–7; Macarthur, *Feminist Politics of Music*, 100–1; Rosen, “Music à la Mode,” 61.

⁵⁹ Ironically, making this point in a presentation of this paper led to a 20-minute discussion about McClary’s content. I am aware that making such a point does inevitably lead to the further essentialising of McClary as *the* feminist musicologist, but perhaps it is these kinds of discussions that need to take place in order to move on. In the same way we might venerate Adorno, but that does not mean we see him as defining his musicological corner.

⁶⁰ Citron, *Musical Canon*, 42–3.

⁶¹ Sally Macarthur, “Performance Rites: AMEB, or not to be?” in *Musics and Feminisms*, ed. Sally Macarthur and Cate Pynton (Sydney: Australian Music Centre, 1999), 25; McClary, “Making Waves,” 88–92.

consider female composers alongside their male counterparts, rather than as existing in a separate tradition.⁶² When considering the next step for critical feminist musicology, similar issues arise. Because feminism in musicology emerged as part of a reactionary movement, it immediately established itself in opposition to mainstream musicology.⁶³ That is, in the disciplinary canon (to borrow a term from Citron), “feminism” came to be seen as a technique in itself, opposed to others such as analysis and historical research on male composers.⁶⁴ This is why, in *Rethinking Difference*, gender has become a subsumed component of “difference” more generally; if musicologists were to continue studying in familiar ways, difference had to be all-inclusive (intersectional) and the oppositional stance of feminism had to be neutralised. Attempts either to deal with the problems created by critical feminist musicology or to engage with it purely through the work of McClary have been detrimental to the discipline’s progress. Whether this is actually problematic could be debated, save the fact that in 2017 we have the same problem we have always had: aspiring female composers are not presented with mainstream examples of female role models, even though feminist musicology has provided them with the capacity to seek them out. Thus the potential for the implicit belief that “female” and “composer” are naturally oppositional terms still exists for both men and women. As many historical and present day female composers prove, however, this is not the case. If this problem is to be solved, feminist musicology has to once again take an active role in general musicological discussions.

The great challenge for feminist musicology will be regaining the critical momentum it found during the 1990s without drowning out female composers in disciplinary concerns or ignoring other minorities marginalised by early feminism. Debate plays an integral part in sustaining discussion, but neither a shying away from conflict, nor a detailed obsession with methodology (as have both been exhibited in response to the work of McClary and the change in the landscape of gender studies), will allow for the progress that is still so desperately needed. Moving forward will require a challenging

⁶² Macarthur, *Feminist Politics of Music*, 40.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁶⁴ Citron, *Musical Canon*, 22–3.

combination of reasserting feminist musicology without returning it to marginalisation. Returning to methodologies such as close critical analysis of works by female composers (as Sally Macarthur has already begun to do), reconciling and reengaging with the field of gender studies, re-evaluating the work of Susan McClary, and reinvigorating feminist musicological debates might potentially begin to achieve this.⁶⁵ However, this will require concerted effort and a willingness to reconceptualise what feminism itself means and what it has come to represent. The slate does not need to be wiped clean, exactly the opposite. We need to engage with the path critical feminist musicology took in order to revitalise it and resume work on the central feminist problem in Western art music, namely the absence of female participants. A great debt is owed to those feminist musicologists who laid the groundwork – those who painstakingly created the female canon and those who grappled with what to make of it. But the problems their work created are not reasons to surrender, either to obscurity or minutia. They are the reason every student of Western art music should critique McClary or Citron, read the diaries of Alma Schindler, analyse Ruth Crawford Seeger's *String Quartet* or perform the Lieder of Clara Schumann. The problems raised by mixing feminism with musicology will never be solved, but it is the responsibility of the musicological community to make sure these problems continue to be noticed and progress continues to be made. The world has never been more ready.

⁶⁵ Macarthur, *Feminist Politics of Music*, 129–49. Here Macarthur engages with the works of Sofia Gubaidulina, Anne Boyd and Elena Kats-Chernin.

Appendix 1

Canonic Research – chronologically by category

Individual composer studies:

- Citron, Marcia J. *Cécile Chaminade: A Bio-Bibliography*. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1988.
- Block, Adrienne Fried. “The Child is Mother of the Woman: Amy Beach’s New England Upbringing.” In *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music*. Edited by Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou, 107–33. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994.
- Straus, Joseph N. *The Music of Ruth Crawford Seeger*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Cusick, Suzanne G. *Francesca Caccini at the Medici Court*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Todd, R. Larry. *Fanny Hensel: The Other Mendelssohn*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Canonic overviews (focusing on women):

- Citron, Marcia J. *Gender and the Musical Canon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Pendle, Karin, ed. *Women and Music: A History*, 2nd ed. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001.
- Briscoe, James R., ed. *New Historical Anthology of Music by Women*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004.
- Gray, Anne K. *The World of Women in Classical Music*. La Jolla, California: WordWorld, 2007.
- Kenny, Aisling and Susan Wollenberg, eds. *Women and the Nineteenth Century Lied*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2015.

Female musicians in society:

- Mordden, Ethan. *Demented: The World of the Opera Diva*. New York: Franklin Watts, 1984.
- Smart, Mary Ann. “The Lost Voice of Rosine Stoltz.” In *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera*. Edited by Corinne E. Blackmer and Patricia Juliana Smith, 169–189. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.
- Yearsley, David. “Hoopskirts, Coffee and the Changing Music Prospects of the Bach Women.” *Women and Music – A Journal of Gender and Culture* 17 (2013): 27–58.

ABSTRACT

Surveys of feminist musicology frequently acknowledge that its twenty-first-century manifestation is markedly different from its origins. Marginalisation of feminist literature within musicology and a noticeable lack of vehemence in feminist discussions make this obvious, while the near-absence of female composers in concert halls and educational settings make it inexcusable. This paper argues that feminist criticism (a discipline emerging largely in the 1980s and 90s that drew links between feminist theory and artistic works) had a vital but destructive role in the progression of feminist musicological literature.

Early criticism focused either on critically reading the works of female composers (as in Marcia Citron's *Gender and the Musical Canon*) or undertaking literary analysis of existing canonic works (as in Catherine Clément's *Opera; or the Undoing of Women*). Problems arose as both methods were subjected to the changing standards of gender research (particularly the reconceptualisation of gender itself) as well as opposition within the musicological community. Notably, a veneration of the influential work of Susan McClary (*Feminine Endings*) led scholars including Pieter van den Toorn and Leo Treitler to use weaknesses in her work to altogether dismiss feminism in musicology. Feminist musicological discourse therefore became reluctant to engage with distinctly feminist issues, negatively affecting the discipline's primary original goal; mainstream musicological acceptance of the large amount of canonic research accomplished in the late twentieth century.

Moving this discipline forward requires clarification of feminist musicology's goals and acceptance of its nature as perpetually problematic. It is not, however, time to back down.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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