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## TOWARD A FEMINIST CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE IN MUSIC HISTORY



by MOLLY A. WEAVER\*

### Introduction

Meaningful discussion of a feminist critical perspective in music history requires a foundation in feminist theory, both historical and contemporary. After establishing this as a framework within which to operate, I will synopsise feminist critique in several art disciplines, including literature, film, architecture, and visual arts. The inherent similarities and differences in these disciplines will serve as points of departure for recommendations for continued development of a feminist critical perspective in music history.

### Feminism and Critical Theory

An extensive body of feminist theory has been developed over the centuries. The United States feminist tradition stems from British and European theories and dates to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>1</sup> The early movement focused on acquisition of a few basic political liberties for women, namely, the rights to own property, enter into contracts, serve on juries and vote.

The focus of mainstream feminism during the 1960's and 1970's shifted to a discovery of more subtle and deep-seated causes of women's oppression including power and sexual autonomy. Feminist thought in this era challenged heterosexual relationships. Women strongly objected to beliefs associated with marriage laws, which were interpreted as efforts to govern sexual, domestic and nurturing services.

Contemporary feminism has progressed beyond a purely gendered analysis to integrate and address issues of race, ethnicity, class and sexual orientation. Today, feminists have taken on the monumental task of raising the consciousness of an entire culture with respect to biological, capitalistic, and legal sources of oppression.<sup>2</sup>

There is no universal view of "feminism". For the purposes of this article, I have adopted a totalistic view of contemporary feminism, one that encourages the cultivation of feminist consciousness through transformation of the fabric of social relationships.<sup>3</sup> This particular ideology is known as

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<sup>1</sup> JOSEPHINE DONOVAN, *FEMINIST THEORY: THE INTELLECTUAL TRADITIONS OF AMERICAN FEMINISM* (1986), xi-xii.

<sup>2</sup> Jane English, *Introduction*, *FEMINISM AND PHILOSOPHY*, (Mary Vetterling-Braggin, Frederick A. Elliston, and Jane English, eds., 1977), 1-3.

"cultural feminism"<sup>4</sup> and features a broader focus than ideologies that are specifically rational, political, or legal. It promotes direct cultural action to develop a feminist consciousness in the interest of a comprehensive philosophy of women and men.

Feminist theory is not one, but many theories and perspectives that attempt to describe women's oppression, explain its causes and consequences and prescribe strategies for liberation.<sup>5</sup> Much of contemporary feminist critical theory suggests that women's subordination is rooted in customary constraints that block women's entrance and success in the public world.

Society traditionally has excluded women from the academy, the forum and the marketplace. As a result, the true artistic potential of many women was not attained. Although the arts are stereotypically considered a "feminine" domain, women in the arts have been unable to achieve eminence equitable to men. This irony deserves particular attention. The impoverished tradition of women in the arts is, to a degree, a consequence of meager production. More directly, it is the result of male norms and attitudes about what constitutes tradition. Male-dominated access to the arts created "legitimate" professions in traditional forms of artistic expression. Their privileged positions served to delegitimize "other" forms of art to which women had access, such as quilting and printmaking.

Feminist aesthetic theory begins with investigation and critique of traditional assumptions relative to the historical moment. It then continues with an analysis of concerns and skills in the context of the organizing institution and the language specific to each field of art -- literature, film, architecture, visual arts and music. A principal goal of feminist critique in the arts is to promote awareness and change women's status and function within the structures of production.

### **Feminist Artistic History, Practice, Production and Criticism**

Many theorists have asked the question, is there a feminist aesthetic? Yes -- in terms of aesthetic awareness and modes of sensory perception. No -- in terms of artistic production and a constructed theory of art. A feminist aesthetic lies not within a body of work, but within a genderized perspective of that work. This perspective takes into account the gender of both artist and critic. It recognizes the historical moment, organizing institutions and artistic language of each work of art. It requires all artists and critics to be conscious of gender and renders transparent the myths of gender as neutral, irrelevant, or marginal in art.<sup>6</sup>

Traditionally, a male point of view predominated both the production and reception of art. Although a few female works managed public visibility and even acclaim, all major achievements nonetheless remained the exclusive territory of the great *masters* of the pen, brush or keyboard.<sup>7</sup>

In literature, feminists enjoy recognition as critics, although their contributions have been partisan. Until recently, comparatively few precedents existed for the investigation of women's writing outside the male order of characteristics and behaviors. One particular problem of feminist literary criticism is that of perspective -- the notion of *writing women* often is confused with that of *women's writing*.<sup>8</sup> However, women gained entry to the literary discipline of the eighteenth century by means of letters. Eventually, the writing of private letters, diaries and literary conversation was recognized as legitimate aesthetic work.

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<sup>3</sup> DONOVAN, *supra* note 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 31.

<sup>5</sup> ROSEMARIE TONG, *FEMINIST THOUGHT: A COMPREHENSIVE INTRODUCTION* 1 (1989).

<sup>6</sup> Silvia Bovenschen, *Is There a Feminine Aesthetic?*, in *FEMINIST AESTHETICS* 4 (Gisela Ecker, ed. 1986).

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 28.

<sup>8</sup> Sigrid Weigel, *Double Focus: On the History of Women's Writing*, in *FEMINIST AESTHETICS*, *supra* note 6, at 60-63.

Men acknowledged and adopted this new medium into the literary canon.<sup>9</sup> Acceptance into the canon defined a space for women, and in doing so, provided inroads to other art disciplines.

The feminist deficit in the arena of film is profound due to visual media creation and control of social consciousness. Historically, women have functioned in film as loved and manipulated objects defined through a male gaze. Women as filmmakers, however, can strive to express a feminist aesthetic. The leap from objectification in the production process to autonomy behind the camera is perceived as radical. It has caused friction between financial backers, directors, actors, film crews and the audience.<sup>10</sup>

Architecture as a form of feminist expression is a nearly impossible enterprise. The difficulties are twofold. Architecture defined as an art incorporates the impediments of traditional art forms. The challenge for feminists is compounded by the cultural definition of architecture as a science, a purely male discipline. This combination, coupled with the need to maintain a balance between political integrity, a stress-free work environment and financial solvency, has significantly barred meaningful feminist participation.<sup>11</sup>

Feminist art criticism transcends patriarchal dualistic thinking. It evolved without hierarchies and competitions that suppress women's initiatives.<sup>12</sup> Feminist critical perspective in art history connects specific histories of women with ideologies that shaped their practice and historical place. Feminists in this discipline set an important precedent for all arts by confronting traditions of subordination in production and representation.

### **Feminism in Music**

The exclusion of women in the discipline of music has been and continues to be quite prevalent. Eva Rieger, in *Dolce Semplice? On the Changing Role of Women in Music*,<sup>13</sup> embarks on a comprehensive discussion and evaluation of women's underrepresentation as critics, historians, practitioners and producers in the art of music. Rieger's article presents a historical analysis that suggests two possible reasons for this inequity: (1) the contributions of women have differed from those of men within the various branches of music; and (2) the contributions of women have varied over time.<sup>14</sup>

Women, as performers, have gained gradual acceptance as singers, instrumentalists and teachers. In production and composition, however, women have not been as fortunate in securing a foothold. An alleged "natural" creative deficit forced many women composers to publish under male pseudonyms. In reality, Rieger argues, women's oppression in music is attributed to a patriarchal culture's bid for exclusivity and not a feminine lack of creativity.<sup>15</sup>

Several sets of historical circumstances involving institutions and ideologies have been identified as probable sources of the intellectual impoverishment of women in music. Music, from its ecclesiastical functions in the middle ages to more secular purposes in the twentieth century, has a history of alliance with the interests of the state. Musicology has reflected the patriarchal structure of the state and, in so

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<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 47.

<sup>10</sup> Jutta Bruckner, *Woman Behind the Camera*, in *FEMINIST AESTHETICS*, *supra* note 6, at 120.

<sup>11</sup> Christiane Erlemann, *What is Feminist Architecture?*, in *FEMINIST AESTHETICS*, *supra* note 6, at 128.

<sup>12</sup> Gisela Breitling, *Speech, Silence and the Discourse of Art: On Conventions of Speech and Feminine Consciousness*, in *FEMINIST AESTHETICS*, *supra* note 6, at 173.

<sup>13</sup> Eva Rieger, *Dolce Semplice? On the Changing Role of Women in Music*, in *FEMINIST AESTHETICS*, *supra* note 6, at 135-149.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 135.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 136-37.

doing, Rieger suggests, has transferred from society to music the masculine assumption of "natural" feminine passivity and subordination.<sup>16</sup>

In the education of young ladies at the end of the eighteenth century, music was regarded as a nonessential but useful skill. Learning to play an instrument and to sing were good social investments, however, studying music theory and composition were viewed as unnecessary.<sup>17</sup> Women were discouraged from the deeper, more serious pursuit of virtuosity in favor of dilettantism. The former threatened fulfillment of the female destiny of housewife and mother; the latter did not.

The conflict between private and professional life has had more severe consequences for women in music than in other artistic spheres. For performers, celibacy was often a condition of employment. Marriage was grounds for dismissal because society believed women could not simultaneously be a "good" wife and professional artist. Rieger suggests the perceived inability of women to function in a dual role was believed to be a conflict within themselves.<sup>18</sup> Their hearts did not have room for "the serene happiness" of both traditional and professional female roles.<sup>19</sup>

Contemporaneous with the institutional constraints in music were feelings of inferiority and insecurity among women themselves. A man made music to make money while a woman made music to entertain her husband's guests in the drawing room. Women's musical creativity was regarded as trivial and they were not expected to achieve or compete in the musical foray.<sup>20</sup> Due to the difficulty of breaking down ideological barriers, these invisible limitations may continue to influence a woman's decision to professionally pursue music as a career.

Nineteenth century feminists in music agreed that the reins of culture were in masculine hands. The few who wrote about music were careful to avoid socially critical questions. Rieger iterates that although some feminists managed to write influential books, no one openly pondered the difficulties with which women in music had to contend.<sup>21</sup>

### **Recommendations for Feminist Criticism in Music History**

The history of a feminist critical perspective in music may be summarized best in two words: *What History?* Investigation of feminist critical theory and practice in the arts reveal cultural blinders that have repressed scholarship. Recently, however, a handful of feminist scholars, including Susan McClary,<sup>22</sup> Carol Neuls-Bates,<sup>23</sup> and John Shepherd,<sup>24</sup> have begun the monumental task of restructuring the musical canons to make central to the historical analysis the study of women's oppression, contributions and visions of music. Their efforts focus on examining and evaluating the following: (1) Are the nature and causes of women's historically inferior status in music biological or cultural? (2) Can those currently working within the male hegemonic tradition accept fundamental diversity and in so doing, promote redefinition? (3) Should construction of a feminist critical model somehow incorporate

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<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 139.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 141.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 145.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 147.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 148-9.

<sup>22</sup> SUSAN McCLARY, *FEMININE ENDINGS: MUSIC, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY* (1991).

<sup>23</sup> *WOMEN IN MUSIC: AN ANTHOLOGY OF SOURCE READINGS FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO THE PRESENT* (Carol Neuls-Bates, ed., 1982).

<sup>24</sup> John Shepherd, *Music and Male Hegemony*, in *MUSIC AND SOCIETY: THE POLITICS OF COMPOSITION, PERFORMANCE AND RECEPTION*, (Richard Leppert and Susan McClary, eds., 1987).

male and female experiences? (4) Are practitioners of critical discourse fully aware that music as a fine art, does not feature any provable right or wrong?

To guarantee the integrity of the feminist effort in the academy, the traditional assumptions of androcentric methodology must be replaced. The following are strong recommendations to achieve this end:

- \* Feminist critique must strive for a unique voice and vision distinct from male prescriptive critique;
- \* Feminists must insist on communication of women's experiences as distinct from communication of men's perceptions of women's experiences;
- \* Establishment of a feminist critical theory will identify it as one of many critical theories constructed according to a particular set of assumptions that guide legitimate thought and action;
- \* A truly feminist philosophy must recognize the diversity of women's experiences of oppression rather than a universal experience;
- \* Although recognition of the musical histories of women is necessary, constantly identifying attitudes within the discipline from a feminist perspective is not sufficient;
- \* The feminist perspective must infuse the entire discipline of music. In addition to the critical realm, it must service the experiences, thinking and existence of those in history, practice and production; and
- \* Phrases such as "women in music" or "women in academia" must be eliminated; they constitute a denial of discourse. These expressions rarely are countered with the corollaries "men in music" or "men in academia." These statements not only assume that all women think, act and speak with one accord, but also perpetuate a traditional dichotomy of humanity on one hand and women on the other.

## Conclusion

Cultural historians seem ready to abandon statistical references to women's contributions in the arts in favor of recognizing and explaining traditional impediments for women. Despite these efforts, the bridge linking the demands of the feminist movement with contemporary artistic activity remains quite narrow. Recent publications of feminist works through recordings, newsletters and performances may give the impression of an improved status of feminist influence in music history. However, it is not sufficient to emphasize the works confined in the archives. It is necessary to draw attention to the works never written illustrating the reality that feminists play a small role creatively and critically in music.

In the academy, high regard for the validity of the feminist view is still considered "progressive" rather than "mainstream". Establishment of an intellectual tradition of feminist critical theory in music history, movement from the margin to the core of the discipline, requires continued attention to the construction, articulation and distribution of knowledge.

