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Of Poetics and Poiesis, Pleasure and Politics—Music Theory and Modes of the Feminine

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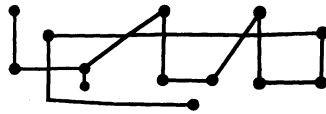
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OF POETICS AND POIESIS,
PLEASURE AND POLITICS—
MUSIC THEORY
AND MODES OF THE FEMININE



MARIANNE KIELIAN-GILBERT

A LITTLE OVER A YEAR AGO, I wrote about my thoughts and experiences at the first conference on feminist theory and music held in June 1991 at Minneapolis: about that binding of identity, creativity, feeling and vulnerability that we felt as we confronted boundaries of acceptance and rejection, and about that identity made possible through our sensed opportunity of unqualified participation.¹ Afterwards I realized that, for many women and men, this feeling of unqualified participation is more often linked with a utopian vision than an actual experience, or possible only in the safety of particular groups. Exclusions, even within the music academy, continue to stem not only from sexism but also from the restrictions of racism, classism, power, and elitism, . . . from traditions of keeping wealth intact and upholding “family” position, from the entitlements of white male privilege which support “unearned advantage and

conferred dominance,” and from the “myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all.”²

One wonders, refocusing Elaine Showalter’s question, “How is it that women, a statistical majority in our culture, perform as a [musical] sub-culture?”³ As of yet, no mention of a woman composer appears in the pages of *Music Theory Spectrum*—I never met with a work by a woman in my musical studies until I began to teach works by women in my classes.

In contrast to this situation, I mention Queen Latifah’s comment, cited by Elaine Barkin: “I make it an effort to keep politics out of my music because rap is music, not school. . . . Kids listen to music to get away from all that preaching and people telling them what to do!”⁴ Music, not school, not preaching. Barkin concludes her essay with a utopian signature similar to that of my own report: “Why not, rather, marvel at how fortunate we are that so many extraordinary choices are available to us!”⁵ But these choices present a dialectics of living and thinking in contradictions; for women in particular, they are uniquely tied to personal identity and to alternate visions of the possible.

On this occasion, I would like to explore further the contradictions and tensions of a feminist music theory, its utopian visions and possible articulations. By linking a feminist music theory with a sensitivity to the particularities of subject position, I want to diffuse the authority of institutional interpretation in relation to the transformative performances of individuals. Their performances hinge on ways of constructing gendered subject positions, of positioning the feminine, and of (re)enacting those positions in music theoretical discourse. Subject position adds a dynamic to the pairs of terms of my title—poetics and poiesis, politics and pleasure—and mediates without resolving the dialectical tensions of the theoretical (or the public) and the situational (or the private). I want to explore first, the possibility of directing music theory’s “tools” toward a personal poiesis more characteristic of performance situations; second, the potential of symbolic associations in spinning the threads of musical experience; and third, the role of a discourse of dream and vision in shaping alternative musical relationships.

I. OF POETICS AND POIESIS: METAPHORIZING EXPERIENCE

Poetics refers to a long tradition of compositional practice (to how composers construct their works), to the tools and mechanics of structural organization in music, and to the industries supporting that organization—its pedagogy and technology. According to Nattiez, traditional theory has determined that the “criterion of identity” of a musical work

connects more with “how a work was composed” than “how it is heard by a given listener.”⁶ In his terms, “poietics” deals with how a work is composed and “ethesics” with how it is heard by a given listener. He emphasizes the “poietic and esthetic dimensions *of the object*,” and notes, ironically, that “if the two were identical, . . . historians of musical language could take a permanent nap.”⁷ Rather than focusing on the poietic dimensions of an “object,” my emphasis here is on how one composes an interpretation, that is, on interpreters’ processes of poiesis—their subjective ways of reconstructing experiences.⁸

I refer to this constructing and personalizing of experience by the term *poiesis*. According to Jane Gallop, a poiesis of the body is a process of creation, of “newly metaphorizing” and transforming physical embodiment.⁹ Through the action of poiesis one becomes the other, recognizing that referentiality and designations of “the real” are ideological constructions that effect and play against one’s transformations.¹⁰ By distinguishing between poetics and poiesis, I want to mark a tension, as others have written, between “looking ‘as a woman’ and the fact of being one, between a feminine position and female experience”;¹¹ between feminine and female genius,¹² or as Gallop writes, between a “feminist investment in the referential body and an aspiration to poetics.”¹³ Such distinctions point up not only the distance, but also the interrelationship, between speculative understanding and real-world experience,¹⁴ between the positional and the personal, between vision and sensed reality.

How is one to reconcile one’s fascination with musical tools, procedures, and verifiable results, with one’s desire to articulate and share subjective experience?¹⁵ Music theorists’ emphasis on the poetics of analytical procedure tends to erase subjective desires by neutralizing the subject. Regarding analytical methods as tools requires that the subjectivity of practitioners and their processes of poiesis recede to the background. Our conception of “tool” does not allow for how those tools, in addition to that which is interpreted, or the interpreters themselves, undergo qualitative changes as they serve different musical and social situations.¹⁶ The sheer proliferation of currently available theoretical procedures, and the emphasis on technology and skill, also cloud the consequences of who is doing the interpreting and the ends to which an interpretation is or might be directed. Though perhaps not intended, our focus on procedure promotes its aestheticization and the elevation of analytical prowess as an end or display unto itself, and limits interpretation in the sense that tools may easily be used as weapons to dehumanize and destroy.¹⁷ Moreover, given the cultural tendency (as for example, in Hollywood film) to treat the “female body and the female self *only* as objects of aesthetic contemplation,”¹⁸ we may reenact this cultural practice of sexual oppression when we attend solely to the aesthetic features

and the autonomy of a musical text, thereby symbolically gendering and rendering it feminine.¹⁹

Experiential subjects, even in their self-centeredness and even as they themselves are ideologically constituted, challenge the apparent neutrality of using tools, the false universality of generalization, and the fixity of reference points. An impatience to get on with our work and our procedures should not hide the idea that the performances of experiential subjects are embodied and encoded in that “work,” linking pedagogy and technology to practitioners with their particular methods and biases, institutional and personal histories, and pedagogical exclusions.²⁰ Their subjective performances, like a musical performance, bring into relationship performer, audience, work, and interpretive space, and actualize the intimate connections between them.

A (feminist) music-theoretical poiesis inquires how subject positions shape and are (re)enacted in musical discourse, even in that discourse which concerns the “structural” organization of music. Such an inquiry not only offers a mode of critique accessible to anyone who might choose it, but also creates a possible dialogue with a variety of musical subcultures and a potential vehicle for realizing social change.

II. OF PLEASURE AND POLITICS: WILDFLOWERS AND FENCES

Taking an exercise walk at 8:00 A.M. not too long ago on a walking trail that encircles the sports playing field at Winslow Park in Bloomington, I came up over a hill and suddenly upon a wash of wildflowers—their unruly fabric, texture, and random dispersal of yellow, pink, white, red, and brown making me stop short in amazement. Their aesthetic surface seemingly independent of any particular socially positioned subject, there for the taking. As I continued my walk, I became aware that in focusing on that sensory play of values, my own situatedness receded to the margins. Yet invoking the locational made for remembering other touches, e.g., that the edges of the patch had been mowed and framed so as to contain it within a nice large rectangle, that I had come walking there, a woman feeling the cultural constraints to acquire a better body from the one I currently occupied. Factors of my class and race yielded still a different feel: I could afford to be there because I had designated “other” women to assume the duties of child care.

Outside this frame of my urban social environment lay, I thought, a source of spiritual experience, a release from the containment of location. How much more difficult to situate oneself in that space linking spiritual abandon and physical reality, between the timeless, the temporal, and the

untimely: such a space offers not only a greater awareness of the particularities, but also the sense of pain and limitation, of the subject frame. Attending to the pleasure of aesthetic values and the aesthetics of my pleasure offered liberation: in freeing my flowers from the constraints of their arrangement I thereby freed myself, or so I thought.

But once recognized, a frame refuses to go away. In the trouble of negotiating the pleasure and politics of my experience, the question of whether to locate perception/experience in aesthetic values or in a bodily situatedness is not an *either/or* but a *both/and* situation. I think of aesthetic pleasure as a “taking” of sorts constructed in terms of my personal situatedness, and/yet my aesthetic response provides a particular context for constructing and attributing that locational meaning.

Situatedness calls up notions and practices of gendering. These practices embody entanglements of personal autobiographical performance, and of positioning and locating such performances in cultures and subcultures. As Nancy Miller succinctly puts it, “the personal and the positional . . . are both the same and different; . . . what feminist theory is about is the effort to analyze that relation.”²¹ I have offered these autobiographical remarks to point up a gap between the sensed realities of lived experience (of individual historical beings) and the process of composing as a means of understanding or reacting to the judgements felt in experience. These relationships support a range of notions and modes of the “feminine,” each with contrasting social and theoretical implications. Underlying these relations are conflicts between “woman” as “fictional construct” and “women” as real historical beings.²²

Examples 1 and 2 show several contexts of the “feminine.” An asymmetry of masculine and feminine, male and female, culturally and historically conditioned identity, underlies the distinctions of Example 1. The “feminine” of the first sense is “other,” defined by dominant ideology in terms of lack (the absence or castration of the masculine), molded by male gaze and desire, and imprisoned within the female body. The “feminine” of the second sense allows the appropriation and direction of the chaotic “other” within systems of dominance, to articulate a position of “outsider” rather than “other” (e.g., evident in notions such as the genius, sublime, and melancholia of Romanticism).

The “feminine” of the third sense is that of radical renegotiation and transformation made possible as women seek to reappropriate cultural constructs for positive identity in subcultures outside or within an oppressive dominant society.²³ It struggles against objectification by deconstructing the male gaze and reconceptualizing connections between the physical, emotional, and mental. The “feminine” of the fourth sense seeks out the experience and utopian possibility of new and

alternate social orders; it creates choices and finds loopholes in laws and systems of oppression. It pursues that which has been excluded and constructs the personal and positional as one among others through identities in other social orders, creative play, and historical and utopian worlds.

“Feminine”:

1. defined (dominant ideology) as “lack,” “other”; molded by male gaze and desire, imprisoned within the female body
2. appropriated by men (dominant ideology), e.g., in notions such as Romantic genius and the sublime, to articulate a position as “outsider” rather than “other”
3. radically renegotiated and transformed by women for positive identity in the dominant culture or in particular subcultures; cultural feminism, “negative” feminism
4. vision and social change: alternative worlds, utopian possibilities, new or alternate social orders

EXAMPLE 1: MODES OF THE FEMININE AS LINKED TO SUBJECT POSITION

1. separatist: separate, but equal; counter-tradition(s); “cultural feminism,” “aesthetics of simple inversion”
2. integrationist: success based on criteria of the dominant ideology; women “artists” as “generic” human not “feminist” work
3. pluralist: idea of two separate spheres rejected, meaning understood as socially defined; play on contradictions
4. social action; utopian and new social orders; transformational art

EXAMPLE 2: CONTEXTS OF FEMINIST CRITICISM: RELATIONSHIPS TO DOMINANT CULTURE [AFTER ENID ZIMMERMAN; JUDITH BARRY AND SANDY FLITTERMAN-LEWIS; JOANNA FRUEH]

I offer these as examples of meanings and ways of articulating the feminine in relation to various subject positions. In addition, positions of criticism themselves operate in different critical and historical relations to a dominant ideology or culture, as indicated in Example 2. For example, the ways of positioning feminist criticism may be variously separatist,

integrationist, pluralist, and utopian or social action, the latter of which I shall draw on later in a musical analysis.²⁴ The interplay of multiple subject positions works against the tendency of technology to mask both the workings of ideology and the particularities and biases of subjectivity. One thus resists the tendency to invoke or imply tools as “universal” for, say a particular music, since that which is implicated as “universal” (without subject position) is usually coded “masculine” without implicating itself in that universe or recognizing anything outside itself.²⁵

As an example of a masculine appropriation of the feminine (category 2 of Examples 1 and 2), the following account builds upon, but is different from a recent analysis of Schenker’s narratives by Richard Littlefield and David Neumeyer.²⁶ Consider how the ideas of “fact” and “fancy” carry their own histories and ideologies lurking in the romantic tenets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—fact/empirical observation coded masculine and validated as “science”; fancy/whimsy/sentiment/ornament coded feminine and contrasted with masculine genius, understood in the nineteenth century in relation to those females who merely aped or faked that genius.²⁷

We draw on this tradition when we construe an opposition between Schenker’s “facts” and his poetic asides (“his fancies”), and as we privilege the use of his technical over his nontechnical descriptions. Plainly put, Schenker’s specific procedures and the methods he offers are understood as “factual”; his “fancies” and added poetic “touches” are descriptive of musical effects.

One bias of theory is to supplant the fancy of effect by more sensibly regarded, that is, emotionally and physically neutral perspectives. On one hand, the leveling force of ideology makes respectable the “fancy” of Schenker’s poetic descriptions by generalizing beyond the individual. Invoking “drama” counteracts and directs the whimsy of effect: drama (not fancy) calls up the force of teleology, reflecting “action” and configuring the masterwork as masculine, as representing the (male genius) composer’s thought. On the other hand, penetrating the secrets of material Nature draws the music out of the dirty reaches of contemporaneity and out of the presence of a bourgeois (gendered feminine). Masculine genius tames the chaos of matter (inscribed feminine) through artistic selection and synthesis. Although the genius/outsider might be *like* a woman in some respects, by controlling the feminine, he has been spared the fate of actually *being* one. In terms of the romance of genius, maleness transcends biology, femaleness is imprisonment within it.

The assumptions underlying the distinctions in Examples 1 and 2 are problematic to the extent that they do not to respond to or account for more complex subjectivities (I have detailed some of these problems and

assumptions in Example 3). I take Judith Butler's statement that gender "intersects with other modalities of identity (religious, racial, class, ethnic)" to mean that gender does not exclude other modalities of identity but is somehow deeply implicated in each of them.²⁸ In contrast, by regarding gender as exclusive, as synecdoche—making a part (gender) to represent the whole—is to initiate a competition of identities within each subject that must then struggle and compete to win a higher ranking on a scale of suffering and oppression.²⁹ This sense that interpretations are somehow to be privileged if they are gender-focused, or the worry that gender is made to be a final arbiter of meaning and thinking, are symptomatic of misunderstanding gender as a category of identity rather than as a mode of performance.³⁰ How might one construe practices of gendering without promoting simple, reductive binarisms, or without eschewing all division in favor of connection and relationship? How might one realize the desire of feminists to give voice to the dialectical and even contradictory positions of women's experience?³¹

1. rejecting meaning as particular to social constructions and historical contexts
2. categorizing based on a heterosexual (binary) framework
3. invoking generic, unitary perspectives: who are the women being spoken for?
4. obscuring subcultural/ethnic/national dimensions in relation to categories of western ideology/culture
5. denying other contexts of oppression: racism, ageism, colonialism, anti-Semitism
6. discounting the role of identity as political force through individual reflection and challenge
7. negating the variables of more complex subjectivities
8. not allowing, or being open to surprise, "playfulness," flexibility and change

EXAMPLE 3: PROBLEMS AND ASSUMPTIONS

One response to this question is in articulating a utopian dream and its relationship to lived experience. Such practices occur in traditions of female performance and are also possible in ways of characterizing music. They give voice to alternate social orders by articulating multiple modes of identity and by questioning existing paradigms. The practice of configuring subject position in play with the tradition of the dream, the

promise—the possible gifts of feminist and music-theoretical narratives—refers to the fourth aspect of Examples 1 and 2, social action and utopian vision.

In a chapter of her book, Nancy Miller offers a series of quotations from texts written by women, all of which are dream passages, and has the following to say about them:

The dreams tend to occur in a writer's text [usually toward the end of the essay] as a way of pointing to an as yet unrealized program of social change; their occurrence in the place of closure, as a move toward closure, engages and exhorts the reader to share the dream, to imagine and help create a world, a text, a mode of being in the world beyond what has already been imagined and realized . . . [to look] for an elsewhere in which to locate the vision of an otherwise.³²

Such dreaming reimagines and reconfigures experience through non-linear, not necessarily analogical correlations. It makes possible multiple sites of action in which symbolic linking and association can freely occur. It juxtaposes physical with imagined spaces, revealing commonalities and contradictions that require interpretation. Feminist writers have also discussed such utopian/social action visions in terms of performance as the offering of a promise and as a consequence of knowing language as reality.³³

In constructing a new order of musical experience, one asks the reader's permission to engage in conceptions that are relevant for the experience and understanding of other worlds, both lived and imagined. Example 4 shows a variety of music-narrative strategies that have been, or might be, brought into such service, ranging from those which recount some deviation or transgression of a norm to those which add emphases typically excluded from "normal" procedure.³⁴

Why are practices of musical visioning-dreaming-promising suspect? Because they call into existence that which they configure, even if negating the dominant social order only momentarily in experience? Because such texts take the risk, according to Monique Wittig, that a political theme will "overdetermine the meaning, monopolize the whole meaning," will divert the text from "its primary aim, [of changing] the textual reality within which it is inscribed," and will prevent the text "from carrying out the only political action that it could: introducing into the textual tissue of the times . . . that which it embodies"?³⁵ Because such dreams, as Carol Flinn says, threaten to move "the argument precariously close to utopianism that suggests that woman and music function beyond patriarchal inscription"?³⁶

Nevertheless, to disavow dreaming—and projecting reflexive identity in alternate contexts—is to forget that the performances of women are closely affiliated with those practices and reflect the realities and the restrictions of exclusion and oppression. These visions and promises create a mult textured fabric of symbolic associations that link living and imagining without collapsing their distinctions. The following characterization of a movement from Miriam Gideon's *Suite for Piano* (1966) draws on these traditions of female poiesis and has a performance history: I played this movement at the conclusion of my talk at Minnesota without comment. I return to this example now to situate my choice and to attempt to come closer to what I felt then but could not articulate: the multilayered associations of musical experiences in empathy with, and in response to, those traditions of performance.

1. breaking conventions, deviation from or transgression of norms: reading “against the grain”
2. alternate plots; twists on conventional methods (unity, hierarchy)
3. refiguring patterns of domination: emphasis on relationships outside systems of dominance; extra-hierarchical relationships
4. positioning autobiographically; unveiling theoretical biases and agendas; working with experiential narratives
5. reading “without convention”; having fun with “ad hoc” personal creations
6. relating nontechnical (metaphorical) and technical language; deconstructing hierarchies and oppositions of “fact” and “fancy”
7. uncovering relationships between dominant and marginalized strategies of reading
8. investigating musical agency (dramatic, analogical, disruptions, inter-locutions)
9. adding emphases: textural, timbral, textual, physical gesture and movement, temporal and “untimely” events
10. recognizing genres of intrinsic analysis in relation to personal and positional factors: utopian analogues, reenactments of cultural codes
11. linking intrinsic and extrinsic positions: intertextual, intersemiotic, inter- and multidisciplinary, writer-reader relationships, relationships of social and historical contexts

EXAMPLE 4: A MUSIC-THEORETIC POETICS/POIESIS:
STRATEGIES OF ANALYSIS IN RELATION TO SUBJECT POSITION;
FEMINIST THEORY AS A MODE OF CRITIQUE

III. MIRIAM GIDEON'S *OF SHADOWS NUMBERLESS*: PRESENCE RATHER THAN SEDUCTION

Example 5 shows two passages of “Tranquillamente: . . . white hawthorne and the pastoral eglantine” of Miriam Gideon’s suite, *Of Shadows Numberless*, on Keat’s poem, “Ode to a Nightingale.” Given are the beginning “Tranquillamente” (Example 5a) and later “a tempo” (Example 5b, measures 48ff.). The following frames present different analytical voices in textures of “association” and “conversation”—as multiple subjects positioned both “inside” and “outside” the work. The “conversation” is that construction of an analyst/listener that brings these various subject positions into relationship. The threads of multiplicity and symbolic linking of these alternate intuitions allow connections to resonate without fixing them to a totalizing vision.

PERFORMING THIS MOVEMENT

“Tranquillamente” (Example 5a): crossing left hand over right; perfect fourths link with major and minor thirds filtering through a harmonic aura of the quartal and tertian, grouping gestures irregularly against a regular pulse in the sensuousness of the atonal backdrop. Melody circular, winding through rising and falling leaps—no slinking through half-step chromaticisms here; harmonic parallelisms blurring distinctions of melody and bass, centered yet teleologically suspended, refusing to use the gesture of phrasing as enclosure.

“A tempo” (Example 5b): hands crowded, then lifting and settling (measures 56ff.), the left on low pedal C, the right arching down from the previous high upward gesture, leaning into, climaxing *on . . . in . . . of . . . (touching, embodying, partaking)*; left hand linking the space of low resonant notes with higher oscillations; right hand shifting sonic weight, shaping the release of slurred melodic groups; after *lunga* hold on allargando E^b over A . . . lifting to . . . space/silence . . . return [Tempo I/Tranquillamente].

MEETING MIRIAM GIDEON (BORN 1906)

Entering her Central Park West apartment, 2 July 1992; making my way into a tiny room framed by books and more books; suspending time in the hotness of the enclosure; waiting and noticing a collection of essays on the table, *Writing Memoirs* by Anne Dilliard in big typeface; struck by the sentence about not holding a grudge, not playing the

a. “Tranquillamente”:

Analysis: ♩ = ♪

Analysis: ♩ = ♪

pp

mf

p

This system contains two staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/4 time signature. It features a melodic line with slurs and fingerings (3, 5, 7, 7). The second staff continues the melody with slurs and fingerings (11, 13, 15, 17). Dynamics include *pp*, *mf*, and *p*.

Tranquillamente ♩ = 92
(Let the melody line float above the accompaniment, which should be very soft.)

pp legato

una corda

poco cresc.

mp

poco cresc.

This section contains three systems of piano accompaniment. The first system is in treble clef, the second in bass clef, and the third in bass clef. The music consists of arpeggiated chords and rhythmic patterns. Dynamics include *pp legato*, *una corda*, *poco cresc.*, and *mp*.

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EXAMPLE 5: MIRIAM GIDEON, SUITE FOR PIANO (1966), OF SHADOWS NUMBERLESS ON KEAT'S "ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE": "TRANQUILLAMENTE: . . . WHITE HAWTHORNE AND THE PASTORAL EGLANTINE."

b. “a tempo,” measures 48ff. (a modified return of the “Tranquillamente” directly follows the conclusion of the “a tempo” section):

Analysis: $\text{♩} = \text{♩}$

48 *a tempo* $\text{♩} = 80$
p
una corda

50 52 54 *cresc.*
tre corda

56 *meno mosso*
f 58 *sempre f* 60 62 *p sub.*

48 *a tempo* $\text{♩} = 80$
p
una corda

52 *cresc.* *Rit.*
tre corda

56 *meno mosso* $\text{♩} = 66$
f *sempre f*
loco

60 *loco* *p sub.*

EXAMPLE 5 (CONT.)

victim or buying into that situation; sensing Gideon's openness to me as we moved into her other room "to work."

CONVERSING

The times of her remembering in the syncopated rhythms of short- and long-term memory; our sharing the different places we both were (too much focus on me, I thought). Her refusal to engage in language which would divide one's creative engagement with music, that engagement like sex in the sense of feeling right, in a groove, in movement. Questions of text and music not separable, for her deeply expressive—music articulating texts as being *of* a sound world, rather than *in* or contained *by* that world, rather than explaining them.

HEARING THE RHYTHMS OF PITCHES

As shown on the staves above the score excerpts, halving the durational values of the melody of all sections depicts the irregularity of melodic groups in relation to hypermetric patterning. In the "Tranquillamente" section (Example 5a), these irregularly placed melodic gestures, even as articulated in a context of metric regularity, project a sense of forward motion to irregularly placed hypermetric downbeats. This feeling differs in effect from that of the climactic "a tempo" and "meno mosso" sections (Example 5b). In these later sections the hypermetric articulations of the irregular gestures are set free from a context of "goal-directed" downbeat arrivals, their upward movement suspending again and again any sense of melodic closure.

REMEMBERING HER 1970 STATEMENT

"I strongly believe a woman composer can have something special to say, in that there is a very particular woman's way of responding to the world—and this in some basic way is quite different from and yet no less important than a man's."³⁷

INTERPRETING

Gideon's language/medium of atonality embodies a fragrance of wildflowers in the sense of eschewing flower arrangement, not fixing location

of poet or song, settling in the fabric of their encounter: the melody line too irregular, too linked with harmonic context; harmony as melody, even as it “float[s] above the accompaniment.” Presence rather than seduction is at issue here. This atonality combining the familiar and banal (melody and “accompaniment”) without idealizing climax, maintains presence, surmounts aesthetic oppression, and admits the possibility of sonic beauty without objectification.

MAKING INTERTEXTUAL CONNECTIONS

Coming across a postmodernist reading of Keat’s “Ode to a Nightingale” by Thomas Docherty,³⁸ Docherty’s reading of the poem thematizes its literary melancholic voice, the darkness of vision, the difficulty of hearing, the unheard melodies, the nightingale’s melody as both poison and cure, the murderous silencing of alterity, and the consequences of rationalizing away unheard song rather than hearing it.³⁹ His reading stresses postmodernism’s concern with the contamination of identity, a contamination that he depicts in terms of the feminine, the alterity created by suppressing “womanly voices”:

Criticism has tried thus to render it a modernist poem—understandable—which means that its alterity, its suppressed womanly voices, still remain unheard by criticism. . . . In listening for the voice of alterity, one hears only that that voice is never identical with itself, but always ‘aliating’ itself, always finding yet another displaced locus from which to come.⁴⁰

Gendered identity requires confronting the complexities and contradictions of the “nightingale”: as a “melodious singing” of the *male* bird during mating season . . . as a tenderness of a female caregiver . . . as a solitary music of the night-time . . . as a “feminine” (personal) voice of alterity?

MEDIATING IDENTITIES

A personal voice, a nightingale’s song, sounding and feeling within as one allows oneself to sing, the vibrations configuring singer and song, listener and interpretive space. Performing in this space, an interpreter gives voice to (i.e., discursively negotiates) the multiple identities of personal poesis, poetic work, and communal context.

A world profoundly part of Gideon's experience and music, the world of Judaism and its history of oppression, remains outside my experience. Yet in my coming to know this piece, and through it, Miriam Gideon, I sense those displacements, even as I also sense its connections with the promises, dreams, and traditions of women I have encountered—in the complex garden of “Dreaming,” Op. 15, by Amy Beach, or Elaine Barkin's images of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*,⁴¹ or Kaija Saariaho's *Verblendungen* into the interior of “metaphorical dazzling.”⁴²

* * *

Indifference, denial, resignation, anger, doing battle, understanding rhetoric, coming to terms, undoing opposites, going beyond, voicing identity—these stages of gender consciousness are nonlinear, highly dimensional performances which shape and change performers and their contexts of performing. My “conversations” have sought to interrogate and figure gender in the self-consciousness of women's identity, in the textured fabric of musical experience with its symbolic associations and connections, and in the envisioning of alternative possibilities of musical discourse.

If one is afraid to invoke gender, it is because of the ways gender itself is thought to limit. Moving toward more complex subjectivities and addressing the dialectical and contradictory positions of gendered identity, is to continue in a different direction from ranking oppressions one up and one down, from saying that only women determine feminine experience. In one sense gender celebrates, intersects, and configures every nuance of activity. If invoking gender as if it were everywhere is to render it inconspicuous and ineffectual, restricting it to practices of simple referentiality, the battle of the sexes, or to arguments between essentialism and deconstruction is to pass up an opportunity to configure and imagine the possibilities and promises of a better world through a deeply textured hearing of music.

Exploring the avenues of other and outsider, of the female and the feminine, the personal and the positional, is possible in our dealings with “standard” literature, but I believe that excluded musical signatures and subcultures present an as yet unexplored chance to learn. These require ways to bridge without collapsing, to mediate without resolving, distances between experience and understanding, between vision and lived identity, between the plea of our mothers, “Why don't you go already?”⁴³ and our escape—the daughter's guilt in the face of the immobility of the maternal victim. This sense of distance is essential to a

strongly felt self-consciousness, a sense of a personal voice within a cultural language. Women, seeking solace in rooms of their own, also look outward, “into life,” making “their room the universe,” and opening doors to make a difference.⁴⁴

NOTES

1. Marianne Kielian-Gilbert, "Feminist Theory and Music Conference, Minneapolis, June 1991: Questions on Ecstasy, Morality, Creativity," *Perspectives of New Music* 30, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 240–42. An earlier version of this text was read at the conference of the Society for Music Theory in Kansas City, Missouri, October 1992. My footnotes cite the texts of feminist writers which I draw upon in the course of this paper, so that readers can position themselves in relation to the conversation between texts.
2. Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," *Peace and Freedom* (July/August, 1989): 11–12.
3. Quoted in Nancy Miller, *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 28; from Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 14–15.
4. Elaine Barkin, "either/other," *Perspectives of New Music* 30, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 225; this quotation from Latifah is in Dennis Hunt's interview, "10 Questions: Queen Latifah," *Los Angeles Times*, 8 September 1991.
5. *Ibid.*, 226.
6. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 87.
7. *Ibid.*, 175 (his emphasis) and 176.
8. Nattiez does recognize the accountability of how one composes an interpretation, that is, of each person's personal "poietic process" of reconstruction. *Ibid.*, 77.
9. See Jane Gallop, *Thinking Through the Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), especially 94–99. This metaphorizing undoes the belief in a simple unquestioned referentiality, but without denying the consequences of referentiality: "Belief in simple referentiality is not only unpoetic but also ultimately politically conservative, because it cannot recognize that the reality to which it appeals is a traditional ideological construction. . . . If the poetics of experience is one that aims for a poiesis of experience, that attempts to reconstruct experience itself, to produce a re-metaphorization, then

although we cannot embrace simple unquestioned referentiality, neither can we unproblematically deny referentiality" (98–99). A photo, for example, makes its subject into an object of desire, and maintains a special relationship to the "real" as that which is pictured (154–55).

10. In the actions of poesis (of metaphorizing), of bridging different frames of reference, an alternate drama emerges, one characterized by Helene Keyssar as "presenting and urging the transformation of persons and our images of each other. . . . It is becoming other, not finding oneself, that is the crux of the drama; the performance of transformations of persons, not the revelation of a core identity, focuses the drama." See her "Drama and the Dialogic Imagination: *The Heidi Chronicles* and *Fefu and Her Friends*," *Modern Drama* 34, no. 1 (March 1991): 92–93. I am indebted to Ann Fox for this reference.
11. The terms "masculine" and "feminine" refer to socially determined constructions of gender; the terms "male" and "female" refer more to the biological differentiations of this construction. See Rosemary Betterton, "How Do Women Look?: The Female Nude in the Work of Suzanne Valadon," in *Visibly Female, Feminism and Art Today: An Anthology* (New York: Universe Books, 1988), 257.
12. See Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 10: "A feminist aesthetics is one that exposes the prejudice that represents the female as lacking, seeks to show how we can escape it, . . . and then goes on to trace matrilineal traditions of cultural achievement. A feminist aesthetics interests itself in *female*, not feminine, genius."

Nancy Miller phrases this distinction in terms of an anxiety over speaking *as* and speaking *for*. See her *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 20.
13. *Thinking Through the Body*, 95.
14. See Christopher Norris, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism: Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 35–38, 243, *et passim*.
15. Thanks to Elaine Barkin for helping me realize the importance of this question.
16. I am indebted to James Buhler for conversations on this point.

17. See for example, William Benjamin's metaphorical discussion in "Ideas of Order in Motivic Music," *Music Theory Spectrum* 1 (1979), 1: "precision equipment for penetrating facades is not designed to be hurled like a demolition ball at the objects it is meant to transform."
18. See Mary Devereaux, "Oppressive Texts, Persisting Readers, and the Gendered Spectator: The *New Aesthetics*," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48, no. 4 (Fall 1990): 342.
19. For further implications of this tendency see Suzanne Cusick's paper, "On a Lesbian Relationship with Music: A Serious Effort Not to Think Straight" in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicologies*, ed. Philip Brett, Gary Thomas, and Elizabeth Wood (New York: Routledge, 1993). The analogy between the aesthetic contemplation of autonomous texts and sexual oppression derives from theories of "male gaze" in visual contexts (see note 18). This analogy does not factor in the diverse practices of musical listeners.
20. For a related view, see David Lewin, "Women's Voices and The Fundamental Bass," *Journal of Musicology* 10, no. 4 (Fall 1992): 464–82. I thank Lewin for sharing this article and for giving me an opportunity to discuss its ideas.
21. Nancy Miller, *Getting Personal*, 16. How might a personal situatedness encompass more of music theory's practices, thereby, as Miller might say, personalizing the theoretical and theorizing the personal (21)? I am indebted to Marion Guck for bringing this book to my attention.
22. See Linda Alcoff on Teresa de Lauretis in "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," *Feminist Theory in Practice and Process*, ed. M.R. Mason, J.F. O'Barr, S. Westphal-Whil (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 312ff. Originally in *Signs* 3, no. 3 (Spring 1988).
23. See Tania Modileski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991): "By focusing on subcultures and studying the values and beliefs associated with them, the analyst is able to make sense of the ways in which 'messages' are 'decoded' according to the shared cultural orientation of particular groups—the contradictions between the decoded messages and the dominant ideology being the points of rupture into which revolutionary ideologies might insert themselves" (38).
24. Here I follow Enid Zimmerman's categories, separatist, integrationist, pluralist, and social action (5), and thank her for calling her

- article to my attention. See her "Teaching Art from a Feminist Point of View," *Visual Arts Research* 16, no. 2 (1990): 1–9. Similar organization is also featured in J. Barry and S. Flitternam-Lewis, "Textual Strategies: The Politics of Art-Making," and J. Frueh, "Towards a Feminist Theory of Art Criticism," in *Feminist Art Criticism: An Anthology*, ed. A. Raven, C.L. Langer, and J. Frueh (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1988), 87–97 and 153–65 respectively.
25. See also Monique Wittig, "The Mark of Gender," in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 76–89. "The abstract form, the general, the universal, this is what the so-called masculine gender means, for the class of men have appropriated the universal for themselves" (79–80).
 26. I appreciated the chance to discuss these and related issues with Richard Littlefield and David Neumeyer regarding their paper, "Rewriting Schenker: Narrative—History—Ideology," *Music Theory Spectrum* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 38–65. My discussion draws upon pages 44–50 of their article.
 27. See in particular, Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). Nineteenth-century authors aligned the *feminine* intuition of the male genius with the consequential, and relegated potential female intuition to the ephemeral and decorative. They made a distinction between: "'imagination' (a good thing, and characteristic of the genius mind) and 'fancy' (an inferior thing, and characteristic of those [females] who merely fake genius. . . . The distinction between creative ('productive') and pseudo-creative ('reproductive') imagination is integral to all the Romantic theorists of Art. The lower grade of imagination—in English 'fancy'—was described in contradictory and puzzling ways by different authors. Sometimes it was 'gay.' Sometimes it was associated with the 'beautiful.' Sometimes it was deluding. It is always puzzling . . . until we notice that it re-works characteristics of mind previously attributed to females who ape the great male ingenium" (100).
 28. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 3: "Gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, . . . gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities."
 29. See Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York, Routledge, 1989): 116.

30. See Judith Butler for a detailed discussion of this distinction.
31. Jane Gallop, *Thinking Through the Body*, 93: "To the extent that I feel myself associated with feminism, that I wish to associate myself with feminism, . . . I am afraid of embodying it as backward, unworthy, and unable to deal with poetics, unobtrusive, flat-footed, and literal-minded." Related to my questions, her text points up the desire of feminists to articulate the multiple positions of women's experience.
32. Nancy Miller, *Getting Personal*: "This points to the simultaneous existence of both the vivifying claims of identity and the murderous results of those claims across the geopolitical map" (86–87).
33. On feminist vision as promise see Tania Modileski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 46–51. On language as reality see Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind*, 26: "They do not see that this discourse [pornography] is reality for us, one of the facets of the reality of our oppression. They believe that we are mistaken in our level of analysis."
34. For example, Marion Guck and Rosemary Killam have called for modes of discourse which stress professional connection and affiliation. Recent work on associative modes of musical relationship developed by Steven Peles, Patrick McCreless, and myself, constructs specific ways to diffuse the hierarchical rigidity of musical thinking and to allow for new ways of configuring the interactions and relationships of music. Work by Claire Boge, Marion Guck, Fred Maus, Richard Littlefield, David Neumeyer, and Robert Snarrenberg explores both the biases of particular language constructions and the effects of construing the narratives of music in relation to different subject positions. Judy Lochhead uncovers links between accounts of music's temporality/motion and particular analytical dispositions.
 Claire Boge, "Poetic Analysis as Part of Analysis Pedagogy," *In Theory Only* 12, nos. 3–4 (February 1992): 47–67; Marion Guck, "Analytical Fictions," Society for Music Theory conference, Oakland, California, 1990; Marianne Kielian-Gilbert "Associational Procedures in Chromatic Tonal Music," International Conference of Music Perception, Los Angeles, February, 1992; Rosemary Killam, "The Counterpoint of Independent Voices: Feminist Epistemology's Contribution to Understanding the Language of Music Theory," Indiana Conference on Music Theory, Bloomington, Indiana, April, 1992; Littlefield and Neumeyer, op. cit.; Judy Lochhead, "The Metaphor of Musical Motion: Is There An Alternative," *Theory and*

- Practice* 14/15 (1989/90): 83–104; Fred Maus, “Music and Narrative,” *Indiana Theory Review* 12 (1991): 1–34; Patrick McCreless, “Syntagmatics and Paradigmatics: Some Implications of the Analysis of Chromaticism in Tonal Music,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 13, no. 2 (Fall 1991): 147–78; Steven Peles, “‘Strength of Connection’: On Some Extrahierarchical Aspects of Voice-Leading in Classically Tonal Music,” Society for Music Theory conference, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1991; Robert Snarrenberg, “Myth and Stories for Ourselves,” Society for Music Theory conference, Oakland, California, 1990.
35. *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, 62–63.
 36. Carol Flinn, “The ‘Problem’ of Femininity in Theories of Film Music,” *Screen* 27, no. 6 (1986), 61: “That the notion of music—and with it, woman—so frequently becomes cast in terms of profoundly imaginary pleasures of disordered unsignifiability moves the argument precariously close to utopianism that suggests that woman and music function beyond patriarchal inscription. . . . To theorize that woman can do so is to risk losing her and music to imaginary obscurity, meaninglessness and social ineffectivity.” I thank David Neumeier for bringing this article to my attention.
 37. Cited in Barbara A. Peterson, “The Vocal Chamber Music of Miriam Gideon,” in *The Musical Woman: An International Perspective*, vol. 2, ed. Judith Lang Zaimont, et al. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), 226; quotation from Albert Weisser, “An Interview with Miriam Gideon,” *Dimensions in American Judaism* (Spring 1970), 39. Also see Miriam Gideon’s reply included in the responses of nineteen women composers, “In Response,” edited by Elaine Barkin in *Perspectives of New Music* 20, nos. 1 and 2 (1981–82).
 38. Thomas Docherty, *After Theory: Postmodernism/Postmarxism* (London: Routledge, 1990), 157–60.
 39. *Ibid.*, 157–60: According to Docherty the poem articulates the “poet’s inability to sing, especially in comparison with the bird who sings ‘in full-throated ease’” (157). “The song of the bird is precisely a poison being poured into the porches of Keats’s ears, for it is the cause of the poet’s pain . . . [and] also, paradoxically the cure . . . but the more well he becomes, the more diseased he actually is in acknowledging his own relative poetic inability, and so on” (159). “To hear the night-singer, the nightingale, is to commune with the voices of the dead, and to accept the call for a murderous revenge. There is a clear and explicit link, once more, between the song of the bird and some kind of call to revenge, a call to murder. That murder

is sexual. . . . Silencing is equivalent to a kind of murder, according to which alterity has to be sacrificed in order for a homogeneous, unified, decorous dominant ideology to legitimize itself" (160).

40. Ibid., 168 and 170.

41. Elaine Barkin, "IGOR's Goriest ***tune" (1982), [*The Rite of Spring*, "Introduction," Rehearsal 12–12+3]. From *Image: A Collection* [text/graphics by Elaine Barkin, Jane Coppock, Catherine Schieve, J.K. Randall, Robert Paredes, and Benjamin Boretz] (Red Hook: Open Space, 1987).

42. From the composer's program: "Blindingness, various surfaces, textures weaves, depths. Metaphorical dazzling. Interpolations. *Contrejour*. Death. The sum of independent worlds. Shadowing, the refraction of light." See Risto Nieminen, "At the Moment The Computer and I Belong Together," *Finnish Music Quarterly* 3, no. 7 (1985): 25.

43. See Miller, *Getting Personal*, 137–38.

44. See Carolyn Heilbrun, *Reinventing Womanhood* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), especially 178–86.