

QUEER AND TRANS IDENTITY IN THE LIVES OF WESTERN ART MUSICIANS

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Introduction

Music is generally regarded as a neutral – a *neuter* – enterprise... because of the desire not to acknowledge its mediation through actual people with gendered bodies.¹

This thesis takes up the idea expressed by the musicologist Susan McClary that music is *not* a “neutral enterprise” and, in what follows, I seek to explore the results of acknowledging music’s mediation through queer and trans bodies. It will be useful to define the terms “queer” and “trans” in this context: queer refers to all sexualities which fall outside of normative heterosexuality, while trans refers to all gender expressions and identifications which do not align with the one assigned at birth. Several books could be written on the subject of queer and trans experiences and identities as they relate to western art music. In fact several books already exist that examine a variety of relationships between gender and/or sexuality and music.² This branch of musicology, pioneered in the 1990s by such authors as McClary, Ruth Solie, Marcia Citron, Elizabeth Wood, Philip Brett, and Gary Thomas was ground breaking and thought provoking, and suggests many avenues for further research. My aim in this project is to follow one of these avenues and, in so doing, initiate a discourse on relationships between queer/trans

¹ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, gender, and sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 139.

² See especially: Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas, eds., *Queering the Pitch: The new gay and lesbian musicology* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

Ruth Solie, *Musicology and Difference: Gender and sexuality in music scholarship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

McClary, *Feminine endings*.

identities and the musical works, careers, and creative outputs in the lives of contemporary performers and composers. Rather than attempting to create an exhaustive description of the relationships between gender identity, sexuality, and music (if that were even possible), my approach has been to explore different elements and forms of musical experience and discourse as they relate, or could relate to queer and trans experiences and to suggest fruitful avenues for further inquiry. In this thesis, I will discuss multiple perspectives on, descriptions of, and reactions to the experience of being queer/trans and an art musician today.

The first part of this thesis will deal more explicitly with trans identities, as they are more conspicuously missing from musicology narratives that seek to explore gender and sexuality. Gender and sexuality are so intertwined however, particularly in the arena of performance, that to discuss one without the other is impossible. With this discussion I am seeking to expand and diversify the way these issues are approached in musicology, and to offer new perspectives. In the second part, I discuss the experiences of contemporary art musicians and composers who self-identify as queer and/or trans. I collected the bulk of the data for this section by conducting a series of personal interviews with queer/trans musicians and composers. Through the analysis of these interviews, I began to uncover the often overlooked experiences of trans and queer art musicians and to acknowledge and preserve these experiences.

Terminology

Sexuality and gender as concepts are often confused or used interchangeably.³ Thus it will be helpful to introduce definitions of both terms. I will also add a third term, ‘sex,’ distinct from the first two, so that we may talk more easily about trans identities which are often articulated when there is a disconnect between sex and gender identity:

Sex: The complex system of biological and physical characteristics used to divide people into the categories of male, female, and intersex. Identifying factors include chromosomes, hormones, genitalia, and secondary sex characteristics.

Gender: The complex system of culturally defined characteristics and behaviors which may be used to divide people into the categories of “man” and “woman” whereby men are linked to masculine characteristics and women to feminine characteristics.

Sexuality: The complex system used to categorize sexual/romantic attraction, dividing people into such categories as heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual, based on the gender of the person being described, and the gender(s) of the people to whom they may be attracted.

All three of these (sex, gender, and sexuality) may be subject to change throughout a person’s life, quickly or gradually, unconsciously or by choice.

Categorization is such a basic part of life that we seldom question the efficacy of the practice and the motivations behind the categories we use. For sex, gender, and sexuality the most common method of categorization is a binary. A person is either a

³ Early discussions of homosexuality posit it as “gender inversion” whereby the same-sex desire is an indicator of cross-gender identification (E Mahoney, *Human Sexuality* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983), 309.). In more recent times the inclusion of transgender into organizations and services originally created for lesbian and gay people – adding the T to LGB – has helped to enforce the connection between gender expression and sexuality. And of course most ways of determining a person’s sexuality rely on gender cues rather than observed homosexual behavior.

man or a woman, male or female, masculine or feminine, gay or straight. In western culture these categories are also presumed to correspond such that a woman is feminine and female, and a man is masculine and male. These categories and correlations have a long history and are very convenient; however they do not express reality and this was what Queer theory sought to explain.⁴ Queer theory, the academic discipline devoted to the deconstruction of traditional categories of gender and sexuality, emerged in the late 1980s in the work of scholars such as Teresa de Lauretis, Eve Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and Judith “Jack” Halberstam. In her seminal work, *Gender Trouble*, Butler challenges the assumption of naturalness and neutrality formerly ascribed to categories of sex, gender and sexuality.⁵

While sex, sexuality and gender are separate categories and any mix of them may be expressed in an individual, they are also closely intertwined and affect one another profoundly. To begin with a simple example: a man who is romantically/sexually attracted to men is categorized as homosexual, while a woman who is similarly attracted to men is considered heterosexual. A female bodied man is transgender, while a female bodied woman is cisgender.⁶ Thus our understanding of someone’s gender, sexuality, and sex is heavily affected by how the three categories relate.

⁴ See in particular Joan Roughgarden, *Evolution's Rainbow: Diversity, gender, and sexuality in nature and people* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); A Fausto-Sterling, “The Five Sexes: Why male and female are not enough,” *SCIENCES -NEW YORK-* 33, no. 2 (1993): 20.

⁵ Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on theory, film, and fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998); “Queer Theory,” in *Miriam-Webster* (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 2010), <http://search.eb.com.www.mills.edu:2048/dictionary?va=queer+theory&query=queer+theory>.

⁶ Cisgendered, or cissexual refers to people “who have only ever experienced their subconscious and physical sexes as being aligned,” and is used in opposition to transgendered or transsexual. Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A transsexual woman on sexism and the scapegoating of femininity* (Emeryville CA: Seal Press, 2007), 12.

Sex, gender, and sexuality interact not only with each other, but with all other identities and characteristics that people embody. Kate Bornstein uses the idea of a pyramid to model how identity characteristics interact and how this affects their relationship to the surrounding society and culture, especially in terms of the privileging of certain identities over others. She shows that race, class, and other such factors are inseparable from one's gender identity and affect how one will be perceived moving through the world.⁷ Thus, while this thesis focuses specifically on gender and sexuality, other identity categories are always affecting the perception and experience of these two.

⁷ Kate Bornstein, *My Gender Workbook: How to become a real man, a real woman, the real you, or something else entirely* (New York; London: Routledge, 1998), 38-46.

Musicological history

For many years the analysis of western art music dealt largely with the technicalities of how music was created and organized on the one hand, and composers' biographies on the other, while actively denying any connection between music and the social/cultural contexts in which it was created.⁸ Music was considered peripheral by sociologists and anthropologists, and thus the lone outpost for the study of the cultural context of music was ethnomusicology, which focused on musics that were in some way foreign and exotic to western classical traditions.⁹ In his article on the Sociology of Music in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music*, John Shepherd describes the history of the sociology of music as "diffuse as well as fragmented," referring to the multiple threads of sociology and its traditionally ambivalent relationship to the study of music.¹⁰

In the early 1970s, feminist theory revolutionized social analysis and soon began to be integrated into discourses surrounding visual arts and dance. However musicology did not follow in these footsteps for the simple reason that it had not included *any* social analysis previously so there was no social analysis to be revolutionized. Despite these inauspicious beginnings there were musicologists and historians who began to ask the forbidden questions about western art music: the late Edward Said's ground-breaking study, *Orientalism* (1979), initiated entire disciplines of cultural studies across the

⁸ Solie, *Musicology and Difference*, 3; McClary, *Feminine endings*, 4.

⁹ Martin Stokes, *Ethnicity, Identity, and Music: The musical construction of place* (Oxford UK; Providence RI: Berg, 1994), 1-3.

¹⁰ John Shepherd, "Sociology of music," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online* (n.d.), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/26085>.

Academy, paving the way for all kinds of social and cultural analysis with respect to music, and soon afterwards feminist musicology was born, with its particular emphasis on gender and the musical canon.¹¹

In early 1980s, books and articles that excavated the history of women musicians and composers began to appear.¹² In the early 1990s books such as Susan McClary's *Feminine Endings*, Ruth Solie's *Musicology and Difference*, and Marcia Citron's *Gender and the Musical Canon* brought the methodologies of feminist criticism into the realm of musicology.¹³ With the publication in 1994 of *Queering the Pitch*, musical analysis from a queer perspective entered the milieu.¹⁴ Books such as *Music and Sexuality in Britten* by Philip Brett and *The Queer Composition of America's Sound* by Nadine Hubbs followed.¹⁵ Musical analysis from a transgender perspective is a logical next step for musicology relating to sexuality and gender; part of what I am doing in the following section is imagining what that might look like.

Historical musicology has long had an awareness of the pitfalls of applying modern concepts and terminology to music or events in the past. Meaning evolves and changes and thus it may be anachronistic to project contemporary ideas onto historical figures. This is particularly important in discussions of gender and sexuality, as Susan McClary noted in *Feminine Endings*: "recent research is beginning to establish that even certain fundamental concepts concerning sexuality have changed radically since the

¹¹Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).; Ruth A. Solie, "Feminism," *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online* (n.d.), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/41237>.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ McClary, *Feminine endings*; Solie, *Musicology and Difference*; Marcia Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon* (Cambridge, England; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

¹⁴ Brett, Wood, and Thomas, *Queering the Pitch*.

¹⁵ Philip Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten: Selected essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay modernists, American music, and national identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

seventeenth century, making it extremely treacherous for us today to depend on what we might assume to be universal experiences of the transhistorical body.”¹⁶ The challenge, then, is to talk about historical identities with acute awareness of the changes in context and meaning that inform our thinking and analyses.

¹⁶ McClary, *Feminine endings*, 37.

Literature analysis

The relevance of “extra-musical” characteristics such as gender and sexuality to consideration of music is a question that has been much debated. Musical forms which lack such obvious concrete indicators of meaning like language in the form of song lyrics, or an opera libretto, are often presumed to be “abstract” and, as such, above such petty concerns as the identity or social context of the composer and/or performer. This is not to say that biography has not been important to musicology; but consideration of how gender and sexuality might have been important parts of a composer’s personal and musical identity has not traditionally been part of musical biographies. Contrast this lack of consideration with the fact that works of certain composers have long been claimed to betray an essentialized notion of their nationality: Elgar and his English-ness, Musorgsky and his Russian-ness.¹⁷ Works by composers who happen to be women have routinely been commented on in terms of their innate femininity and for a long time it was thought that a woman could not write a credible symphony because the genre was perceived to be to inherently masculine.¹⁸

I suggest, then, that “extra-musical” factors have, in fact, always affected the way people hear and analyze music: what feminist musicology and other kinds of the “New Musicology” of the 1990s did was to make these factors visible and to discover the ways they actually affect music (rather than the ways they are assumed to affect music). For

¹⁷ Nalini Ghuman, “The Third ‘E’: Elgar and Englishness,” *The Elgar Society Journal* 15, no. 3 (November 2007): 5-12; Marina Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism: From Glinka to Stalin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

¹⁸ McClary, *Feminine endings*.

instance, McClary sums up her justification for exploring sexuality in relation to nineteenth-century symphonies by stating:

In music as obsessed with gender construction and narrative as the nineteenth-century symphony, it would be truly remarkable if this rather crucial factor [the sexuality of the composer] were not relevant.¹⁹

In this section I am interested not so much in the sexuality of the composer *per se*, but in the relationship between sexuality and gender, and between performer, composer, and listener.

In particular, I am interested in exploring the range of behaviors which fall outside of traditional definitions of normative gender and sexuality. Although this range of behaviors is generally subsumed under the term “queer,” I suggest that this obscures the ways in which cross-gender or transgender performance and identification function in musical settings. For instance, is a woman playing a man falling in love with a woman played by a woman displaying same sex desire, cross-gender identification, or simply the director’s casting choice? I suggest that discussing the tradition of cross-gender roles without addressing cross-gender identification (real or perceived by the audience) is akin to addressing these roles without taking into account the subtext of same sex desire inherent in the fact that the audience is almost always aware of the underlying sex of the actors.

Yet the idea of a transgender (or transsexual) identity, like that of a homosexual one (and arguably that of heterosexual as well) is a relatively new concept that cannot necessarily be applied historically. However, limiting discourse surrounding gender variant practices to their role in sexual deviancy does a disservice to transgender history

¹⁹ Ibid., 78.

and to the full understanding of the subject under study. Two different examples will illustrate the point. Billy Tipton, a jazz pianist who lived for most of his life as a man and was found to be female-bodied after his death, is often claimed to have spent years in “undetected drag” simply to escape oppression either as a woman in a male-dominated music scene (and world) or as a lesbian in a heterosexist culture.²⁰ While this simplified reading of Tipton’s gender expression allows his life to be claimed as part of a lesbian musical narrative, it fails to address the complexities of the situation and disregards the fact that he lived and passed as a man for most of his adult life.

Many people have been the victim of sexist and homophobic prejudice throughout history, yet consistently passing as a gender one does not identify with has never been a common solution. Halberstam writes:

Many women in the 1920s did effectively change sex inasmuch as they passed as men, took wives as men, and lived lives as men. It is inadequate to call such women lesbians, and in fact to do so is to ignore the specificity of their lives. It is, of course, also inadequate to simply label them as pre-transsexual; what they were, in fact, were women who wanted to be men before the possibility of sex change existed... It is hard to know which of these women would have desired a change of sex if such an option existed.²¹

Thus we cannot project a simple identity onto Billy Tipton, and we have no way of knowing how he would have identified were he alive today. However while identifying him as “pre-transsexual” is an inadequate description of his life and experiences, to ignore his cross-gender presentation in order to pigeonhole him as a lesbian denies the history of transgender identity and, when expressed by musicologists, reinscribes the invisibility of trans people in the world of art music analysis.

²⁰ Due to a bleeding ulcer for which he refused to go to the hospital, probably fearing discovery, Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making history from Joan of Arc to RuPaul* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 83. See also Philip Brett and Elizabeth Wood, “Gay and lesbian music,” *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online* (n.d.), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/42824>.

²¹ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 87.

The second example of how consideration of trans identities could enrich musicological analysis can be found through an examination of the essay “Unveiled Voices,” in which Joke Dame discusses the sexual and vocal ambiguity of the castrato. Dame argues that “the castrato’s virility, the phallus, has been displaced into his voice” thus viewing the castrato as all man: “most listeners experienced the castrato as a *man* with a high *male* voice.”²² This reading allows Dame to consider the relationship between the male sculptor Sarrasine and castrato Zambinella in Balzac’s novella *Sarrasine* in a purely homosexual light. Dame also considers modern castings of male countertenors or female sopranos in parts formerly filled by castrati, specifically the sexual and vocal implications of casting the leading heterosexual couple with two men, two women, or a man and a woman. Dame discusses the homoerotic overtones or lack thereof implicit in different casting choices and the relation these choices bear to original casting.²³ What Dame does not discuss is the possible interpretation of a female-bodied man or a male-bodied woman, and the implication of such an interpretation to the perception of the opera.

The word castrato denotes a unique sex and gender combination that no longer exists and produces a unique vocal sound also lost to us in these modern times. Katherine Bergeron describes the voice of Alessandro Moreschi “the last castrato” recorded in 1902 and 1904 thus:

[N]otes just above middle C sound, as with a boy soprano, like the very bottom of his vocal range, but they are belted with the force of a fully grown man. As the melodic line lifts, remarkably, to take a soprano’s high B the voice seems to come more from his head, but again – recording quality aside – the sound is different: clearer and purer than the colour either of a female soprano or a male

²² Brett, Wood, and Thomas, *Queering the Pitch*, 144,8.

²³ *Ibid.*, 148-150.

falsettist, it seems to possess an odd, penetrating sweetness, the sharp taste of a unknown fruit.²⁴

Castrati exhibit physical differences beyond the range and timbre of their voices. The arms, legs, and sometimes breasts of adult castrati usually developed to larger-than-normal proportions, making singers “tall and ungainly.”²⁵ In no way could a castrato, in either appearance or sound, be mistaken for an unmodified male or a female person. Thus, the phenomenon of the castrato opens up, I think, the possibility of a more complex treatment of gender presentation in terms of the relation between the sex of the singer and the gender portrayed on stage than Joke Dame allows.

In *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam argues that masculinity is not inherently about being a man, and as such that the concept of masculinity is separable from that of manhood.²⁶ Thus, to perform masculinity as a woman is not sufficient to play the part of a man. Characters performed on stage are men and women with all attendant social implications, a woman playing the role of a man is performing a male form of masculinity in order to articulate a male character and such a performance is distinct from a woman expressing a form of masculinity not directed towards male impersonation.

The question in this case is what relation the castrato bears to performances of male masculinity and female femininity. Casting a castrato in the role of a woman is not equivalent to casting a man in the role, although there is a cross-gender element in either choice. None of this complexity in performer/character, sex/gender relationship however, precludes the experience of a castrato performer as a man with a high voice.

²⁴ Katherine Bergeron, “The Castrato as History,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 8, no. 2 (1996): 175.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 173.

²⁶ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*.

In modern productions casting a man in a role traditionally played by a castrato maintains the cross-gender element, albeit in a different form. Casting a woman in the same role erases the same-sex undertones and cross-gender element, emphasizing instead the difference in sex and vocal range between the main characters. These differences would be apparent when the role was taken by a castrato since their vocal range was similar to that of a female vocalist. Thus no matter the casting choice, in modern productions, the relationship between the performer's sex/gender and the performed sex/gender is altered.

Personal Response

I will now turn my attention to contemporary art musicians and composers who self-identify as queer and/or trans, beginning with myself. I have been working to create pieces on queer themes for about four years now, so I can say with great certainty that both my sexuality and my gender deeply affect the way I compose music. There were of course many factors in my decision to integrate these themes into my creative work. I had already been writing music centered around texts for some time, so it was a natural step to choose texts which both spoke directly to my concern with identity and in some way reflected my own experiences.

Allowing for Ambiguity, performed on my undergraduate senior recital in March 2008, was the first large scale work in which I dealt with themes of queerness and gender transgression. It explores and expresses the complexities of gender identity and the conflicts inherent in failing to present an unambiguously gendered image. Scored for two sopranos and tenor, clarinet, violin, 'cello, and a pre-recorded CD part, *Allowing for Ambiguity* weaves together three texts that center on issues of gender fluidity/fragmentation. The CD part intertwines the texts so that each story is heard in its entirety, but never from start to finish. Musically, the goal of this piece was to reflect the fragmentation apparent in the texts, and also to represent a shift from conflict with fluidity and mutability to harmony with it. *Allowing for Ambiguity* was begun in response to feelings I had had of being fractured, that I was not recognized as a composer in queer and trans spaces, while my queerness was not acknowledged by my fellow

composers and musicians. I also felt that I did not find reflections of my experiences in musical works; I knew of dancers and visual artists portraying beautiful and nuanced expressions of queer and trans experiences, but not musicians and composers, so *Allowing for Ambiguity* was also a response to that perceived lack of representation.

My most recent work, *Contested Reconstructions*, also deals with themes of gender transgression and transformation. In this piece I explore the dichotomy between a double mastectomy as part of treatment for breast cancer and top surgery as part of gender transition/transformation. The music and text work together to explore the fracture and (re)construction of physical embodiment. In program notes for the premiere I explained:

I am not interested in portraying a straightforward picture of transness or femininity, of queerness or heterosexuality, but am interested instead in the boundaries and the ambiguities, the struggle for definition when there aren't words. [*Contested Reconstructions*] revolves around a medical procedure that carries intense circumstantial/contextual meanings, and the contradictions of investment in surgery as necessary cure or chosen vehicle of transformation.²⁷

This acknowledgement of complexity is very important to me. In this piece I wanted to explore the meaning of physical alteration as a deeply contextual and emotional experience. I wanted to express ambivalence towards traditional models of physical transition as cure, in the hope of opening up a space for non-transition as a way of being.

In my own creative work, my goal is not necessarily to educate, but rather to express and explore through art some of the issues I grapple with as a queer gender variant person. My hope is that some people will recognize parts of themselves in what I create and that not all of those people will be the ones to whom the piece is most

²⁷ Program notes, Signal Flow Music and Sound Art Festival, March 15, 2010.

obviously directed. While I do not write music specifically aimed at straight, cisgender audiences, neither do I write music that can only be understood and appreciated by queer or trans people. I write what is important to me and I trust that interested listeners will be able to find a way into my music, a way in which they can relate to it and appreciate it.

Interviews

I conducted personal interviews with twelve people, some in person and some via email. I found them by emailing several listservs asking my friends and fellow students and getting suggestions from my professors and the people I interviewed.²⁸

Consequently my research largely reflects my identities and the circles in which I move.²⁹ Thus I would like to discuss here the omissions from, and biases of my research.

Beyond the more obvious, conscious choices determined by my own interests and grounding in Western art music, my data has been unintentionally biased by other, less obvious facets of my own identity. I am a young, white, female bodied, graduate student, living in the United States. This affects who I have access to, who I am friends with, and who may feel comfortable allowing me to interview them. By far the biggest way in which my sample is skewed is towards white and female bodied people. While I did not specifically ask for people to identify themselves racially, I know that the majority of people interviewed are white and I did not speak to anyone who identified themselves to me as a person of color. Out of the twelve people interviewed only two were not female bodied. These are certainly serious limitations, and were I to extend my research at any point it would be crucial to develop greater diversity. Geographically, I have not had the opportunity to interact with and interview many people outside of the US and all of the

²⁸ The listservs were: Society of Composers Inc., International Alliance for Women in Music, QSTUDY-L. Mills College graduate students and Oberlin College student composers comprised my largest samples.

²⁹ Although I have tried to depart from this, the time frame and scope of my research has made this difficult. For example when I sent an email to the American Musicological Society LGBT round-table group asking that they advertise my study to their members, I received no response whatsoever.

people with whom I communicated live in North America, except for one, who was educated here.

Along other lines the participants broke down thus: about half of the interviewees were in their twenties, with the rest ranging from their thirties to their sixties. Eight of the participants identified as women and eight were living in urban locations at the time of the interview, five in the San Francisco Bay Area. About half of the participants were students and almost all identified as queer in some way. Of the four trans people, three also identified as queer. Two people were not out professionally. I have no information about the economic background of interviewees, except for one participant who described herself as having grown up poor.

This range of individuals certainly affects which perspectives are represented and which are not. These interviews too, are a snapshot in time. I asked the interviewees to be candid about their identity and music and the relationship they saw between the two; it would be unfair to expect any of those things to remain static simply because a particular moment was preserved.

Interspersed with the interviews are quotes from the personal statements of composers represented on the *Lesbian* and *Gay American Composers* albums, printed in the liner notes.³⁰ Although these CDs were published more than ten years ago I found that the composers on these albums touched on a lot of the same issues brought up my interviews and I find them to be a valuable supplement to the information I have collected. In particular I found both in my interviews and the liner notes a deep resistance to essentialization, often leading to a denial of any connection between music

³⁰ *Lesbian American composers*, Compact Disc (New York, N.Y.: CRI, 1998); *Gay American Composers*, Compact Disc (New York, NY: CRI, 1996).

and gender/sexuality. Indeed the introduction to the *Lesbian American Composers* CD calls it the “third volume in CRI’s series of music by fine composers who ‘just happen to be gay.’”³¹ McClary addresses this issue with regards to women composers:

Many superb women composers insist on making their gender identities a non-issue, precisely because there still remain so many essentialist assumptions about what music by women “ought” to sound like. That they are determined to demonstrate that they too can write MUSIC (as opposed to “women’s music”) is understandable. Moreover, it is an important political position and strategy, given the history of women’s marginalization in this domain.³²

The challenge, then, is to explore the ways that gender and sexuality might affect the production and perception of music without essentializing the relationship. This struggle is very apparent both in the words of the composers represented on the *Lesbian and Gay American Composers* albums and in the interviews I conducted. Eve Beglarian writes “when it comes to actually trying to talk articulately about being a ‘lesbian composer,’ the whole business of labeling and identity politics begins to make me uncomfortable.” But she also adds that “it’s hard for me to imagine that the two identities, sexual and artistic, aren’t inextricably intertwined.” Lori Freedman writes “To describe myself as a lesbian bass clarinetist is absolutely accurate but it says nothing specifically about my music, nor from where I am coming artistically.” Ruth Anderson agrees, although leaves open the possibility for other interpretations, writing “while my paramount conviction remains that there is just music and there are musicians, perhaps a scholar like Elizabeth Wood may yet explain another element in my work to me.”³³

I’ve organized the rest of this section around the questions I asked, and have focused on particular questions which elicited discernible trends in response.

³¹ *Lesbian American composers.*

³² McClary, *Feminine endings*, 19.

³³ *Lesbian American composers.*

Do your experiences of being queer/trans influence how you compose/perform?

Most people did not feel that their identity as queer and/or trans directly influenced their musical work. Robert Helps wrote, “I personally feel there is no artistic difference between “gay” music (music written by gay composers) verses “straight” music (music written by, presumably, straight composers),” and Lee Hoiby “see[s] no traces of [his] sexual preferences in [his] (or any) music.”³⁴

It is evident that ties between musical expression and gender identity/sexuality are fraught. Several participants contradicted themselves, claiming both that their gender/sexuality does not affect the music they write or perform and that their whole being influences their music. Electronic music composer and performer Bob Ostertag is very adamant about the importance of making music that is true to oneself, but when clarifying his statement he said that he doesn’t mean it “in an identity sense” and that he does not see his work as tied to his sexuality or gender identity.

Another thread seems to be the idea that there is an essence of personality that is separate from categorizable identity. Becky Lipsitz, a music composition graduate student at the University of Wisconsin – Madison, expressed the hope that eventually “all these trivialities like race, gender, sexuality, etc, [will be] considered minutia in the grand scheme of things, and that who we are as a person [will become] the main focus.” This statement of course, presupposes both that leaving “the trivialities” of identity behind is possible, and that there will be something left. It is an idea with uniquely interesting implications for the performance and perception of music, however it is not currently testable given the importance placed on identity in contemporary culture.

³⁴ *Gay American Composers.*

Some people too, seem to deny that their sexuality and gender influence their music not so much from the stance that identity does not relate to music, but more because they don't find it useful or possible to separate the influence of one part of their identity from the rest. Rachel, a composer, performer and music scholar, opines that her sexuality does not effect her music because "Yes, I think 'out of the box', I think about acceptance and relationships, I think about pairings, I think about clashes of ideas and cultures.... those appear in my music very directly. But that stems from my thinking on culture, politics, and many other topics/identities/experiences as well."³⁵ Thus she is not saying that her sexuality does not influence her music, rather that what effect it has is inseparable from other points of influence.

A few people described an unconscious relationship between their gender/sexuality and their music. Jane Sandberg, a student at Oberlin Conservatory, says that her music reflects her personality which is very closely linked to her gender, and Matthew, a film composition student, says "I think my identity seeps into my music, whether I like it or not, and thank goodness for that."³⁶

Mills College electronic music MFA student Gretchen Jude says that her work is about queerness in that it explores the idea that nobody really fits in completely, and how people mediate that disconnect. She adds that she is interested in musically expressing murkiness.

Do people react to you differently as a musician because of your identity as queer/trans?

Overall people did not seem concerned with the question of whether their gender or sexuality affected how people heard their music. Gretchen didn't know and didn't

³⁵ "Rachel" is a pseudonym, she wishes to remain anonymous.

³⁶ "Matthew" is a pseudonym, he wishes to remain anonymous.

care if her sexuality affected reception of her music, while Becky thought that knowing her sexuality allowed people to understand some of the more programmatic aspects of her work, but was otherwise irrelevant. Canary Burton, a 66-year-old lesbian composer, thought that it made no difference at all. Rachel on the other hand felt that people would react to her music differently if they perceived her to be queer, which perhaps has something to do with why she is not out professionally. Matthew, who is sure that his identity seeps into his music, opined: “whether other people perceive it as being reflective of my queer or trans identity... well, that’s for other people to decide.” That he is not out professionally makes this sort of ascription more complex.

Do you have musical influences/role models who are also queer/trans?

Canary writes that she does have musical influences/role models that are queer and she is “pleased” about that. Tucker Jessup, an Oakland based trumpet player expressed frustration that there are no well-known queer or trans trumpet players. He says, “I wish there were more trans musicians, that would be awesome.” Nuret Tiles asks “What it would have meant to me as a young musician to see the title ‘Lesbian American Composers’ in record stores and libraries?”³⁷

The general feeling seems to be that musically the gender or sexuality of a composer or performer is irrelevant, but that it is important for people to know that successful queer and trans musicians exist. Pauline Oliveros writes, “it seems important to let other women who might still be intimidated know that it is possible to be who you are regarding sexuality and also participate in the larger community of composers.”³⁸

Becky believes that people need to realize that composers they admire are gay, but that

³⁷ *Lesbian American composers.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

the sexuality of a composer is not relevant to actual appreciation of their music.

However, she then adds “Maybe it's good to like composers/athletes/artists/actors/etc because you relate to an element of their life story. I mean, everyone does that.”

Oakland based pianist Regina Schaffer says that she feels an affinity to composers she knows are gay but that the knowledge doesn't really effect the way she hears their music.

How the identities of composer, performer, and listener influence perception of music is a very complex question. It is challenging to find aspects of human interaction, creation, and perception not influenced by personal identity, but it is also very difficult to define how these influences function, and to distinguish different influences and their origins. Gretchen discusses identity as context specific, heavily influenced by where someone is coming from and who is around that person. It is this characteristic of identity which makes it so difficult to quantify and discuss. And yet, the influence is there. It is undeniable that knowing a lot about a composer changes how we hear their music. Thus it is logical that knowing the gender or sexuality of a composer affects our relationship to their music, yet the effect is different for every individual, grounded in personal context, and defining such influence is not so easy. Does a feeling of affinity to a musician change our reaction to their music? Is a relationship to a composer separable from a relationship to their music?

What is your relationship to queer/trans communities? Musical communities?

Most people I talked to felt peripheral to queer and trans communities; instead musical communities seemed to be the larger force in their lives. For some this is a conscious decision, for others a matter of circumstance. Becky prefers to put her time and effort into musical communities and remains on the edge of queer communities by

choice. Rachel has been involved in queer communities in the past and grew up around many queer people, however she is not involved at this point in her life, nor is she out in most of her musical circles. Tucker and Regina both attended San Francisco conservatory, which they described as a “very isolating” environment with few queer people (and no trans folks that they know of). Tucker had come out at age 14 and had immediately become involved in local queer communities; he wonders how he did that because at this point in his life he feels very disconnected from such communities.

The only musician I talked to who described queer communities as the most important ones in his life was also the only non-art musician I spoke with. Madsen Minax, upright bass player in an indie/bluegrass fusion duo, says that being part of a queer community is very important to him. He plays for mostly queer audiences and writes most of his music while on the road, so his involvement in queer communities is also deeply bound up in his music. None of the art musicians I interviewed felt this kind of connection with queer and trans communities and certainly not such a close relationship between the two.

Regina feels that her tangential relationship to queer and trans communities has a lot to do with her work and the time she spends with students and other musicians. She notes that there are gay people in the musical communities in which she takes part, but that these communities are distinct from queer or trans ones. Bob asserts that nobody in the queer community pays any attention to his music. He recalls that when touring he often plays at clubs that have gay nights, but that promotion is never done for his show on those nights because despite his being gay, his music is not considered to be of interest to

the gay community as a whole. He says that this used to bother him, but at this point he has made peace with it.

I find it interesting and a little disturbing that almost all of the musicians and composers I talked to either had little involvement with queer and trans communities or experienced them very separately from their musical lives. For some this is clearly a comfortable situation, but not for everyone. Montreal based electronic musician Tara Rodgers suggests that music is a possible basis from which queer and trans people may build communities and understand their lives. She references the idea articulated by the author Susan Driver, that music can be both public and private which makes it useful and flexible in establishing queer identities and communities. Music is private in that it is often listened to and interpreted alone. One relates to it in a unique and personal way. This can help in figuring out who one is in terms of many facets of identity. “But especially for queer/trans people who are in a time and place where coming out is difficult, the kind of private space that musical experience can afford can be really crucial,” writes Tara. Music also allows connections between a person and a larger network of people and thus is a possible tool for establishing social and professional connections. Tara continues:

Again, this can be a general statement about how music is useful among people who want to connect outside mainstream culture or facilitate an oppositional political consciousness. But specifically for queer/trans people, who may be isolated in their family or local community, music can be a key avenue for forming communities that transcend geographical boundaries and help people find and support each other.

*Do you feel that people react to you differently as a musician because you are a woman?*³⁹

Both in the interviews I conducted, and in the liner notes for the *Lesbian American Composers* album, many women felt their gender to be a far larger factor than their sexuality in their acceptance as musicians and in reactions to their work. While the experiences Rachel spoke about were the most extreme, all of the women I talked to felt that their female identity affected their reception in the musical world. Annea Lockwood writes “Being a lesbian, however, has always seemed nothing special, just one facet of my identity... But gender *is* significant,” while Madelyn Byrne feels that “being female in a predominantly male field has generally been a far more apparent difference than that of my [sexual] orientation.”⁴⁰

Rachel began as classical musician, but as she became increasingly involved in contemporary music she found herself facing more and more resistance when she attempted to take on certain traditionally male roles, such as that of conductor. These experiences eventually led her to abandon music for a period of time. She says that she still encounters discrimination as a woman, but that she is better able to deal with it at this point in her life.

Gretchen feels that people’s perception of her music is definitely affected by her being a woman, as well as the ways people collaborate and improvise with her. She opines that the voice has uniquely gendered implications and thus her position as a vocalist makes the perception of her gender particularly relevant.

³⁹ This question only pertains to those interviewees who identify as a woman.

⁴⁰ *Lesbian American composers*.

Jane suggests that many female musicians exploit their looks in order to attract (presumably male) listeners, and notes that while this presents issues for all female musicians, it is especially acute for transwomen and especially those who are pre-transition and do not pass as female. Regina makes a similar point, suggesting that people are more accepting of her as a lesbian performer because she presents in a feminine manner; that people expect women musicians to look feminine and because she does, she faces less challenges in her musical roles.

Is there anything else you would like to say?

Regina opines that it takes a lot of self-confidence to be a musician and suggests that if one's identity is devalued by society (as for queer and trans people, as well as any number of other minorities) it is more difficult to maintain enough self-confidence to make it as a musician.

Tucker expresses a simultaneous fear of being read as a woman while he identifies as a man and being read as a man when his legal identity is still that of a woman. These fears make him apprehensive when seeking gigs because he is never sure how he will be read and then how he may fail to live up to the identity that has been proscribed for him.

Gretchen's experiences with her identity and sexuality, struggling for definition, yet resisting labels, has led her to a musical approach that resists the concept of "pure music" divorced from context. Susan Cook, professor of musicology at the University of Wisconsin – Madison uses feminist methodologies in her work whether or not the work directly relates to gender or feminism. She says that this use of certain methodologies

relates to her desire to consider cultural contexts and other factors that are in play in music.

Conclusions

In this thesis I have focused primarily on composers and musicians rather than the musical works they create. The field of queer studies has opened up a multitude of new ways of conceiving of gender and sexuality. I have shown that these tools can be applied to discussions of musicians and composers and that the issues they bring up are relevant to our understanding of musicians and their relationship to music. Hopefully this thesis will contribute in some small way to the continual diversifying and deepening of musicological discourses.

Musical communities suffer from the same problems and limitations as society at large and thus it is natural that queer and trans people sometimes find themselves ignored and even belittled. The strongest commonality I found among the people I interviewed was the sense that regardless of the perceptual relationship between music and gender or sexuality, it is important for there to be visible queer and trans musicians and composers simply because of the encouragement it creates for young/emerging artists who may feel isolated and unappreciated. Music is a cultural practice of great power and through it queer and trans people can express themselves and their experiences, but not all musical communities will be welcoming and that is something which must be grappled with. Opening up music history and theory to include more complex treatments of sexuality and gender identity is a step on the path to more general inclusion of queer and trans people in musical communities.

Clearly so called “extra-musical” elements deeply influence how people relate to music and musical communities. Whether in terms of participation in musical groups and collaborations, or decisions about what music to listen to or purchase, the identities of listener, composer, and performer affect perception and experience in myriad complex ways. For some people their gender and/or sexuality seem peripheral to their artistic life while for others the two are inextricably linked. Gender and/or sexuality present barriers for some, not so for others. Queer and trans communities are multiple, as are musical ones, and identifying with one or both does not imply any commonality of experience or understanding. What I have presented and discussed are the perspectives and thoughts of a small subset of both communities. I hope that I have given a sense of the applicability of queer and trans narratives to contemporary musicological discourses and the role that such identities play in the lives of musicians and composers.

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