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## A DISCOURSE ON THE NATURE OF WOMEN IN MUSICOLOGY

However, I am not longer sure what MUSIC is. Susan McClary

### I. Foreword

In his discussion of the so-called New Musicology in one of his articles Stefano Castelvecchi characterized himself as "a linguist from Mars: a visitor to the American academia from outer space (i. e., from Europe)" [2, p. 185]. Since even Castelvecchi considers himself as a Martian alien coming down to new academic ground, from where may I then be regarded (a citizen of Eastern Europe gazing at Western Musicology in a futile attempt to discern where the "old" is and where the "new" is)? I must be from another galaxy, or even further; perhaps, the best is to describe me not as a human being, but a creature of the downworld (according to the famous Tanith Lee, the new wave British fantasy novelist), learning the humans' way of thinking and speaking. And, of course, the first thing that legendarily frightens all the dwarves and ghosts, is the subject of Gender Musicology (the post-Soviet scholar discovers the freedom to write about subjects which he could recently only dream of), which is essential and of the greatest interest to all newcomers.

It is of no surprise that music appears as the realm of different sexual metaphors; contrarily, music seems to be just the one among the whole array of different human activities, all of which are indisputably tied to sexuality. The "new musicologists" speak about matters quite foreign to the true domain of musicology (as it was represented in the *Old*, previous, but not in the *New* scholarship); their subject matter includes, for instance, nontraditional sexuality ("the experience of himself as a gay man in music" by Philip Brett) [1]; different sorts of "differences" (Ruth Solie) [9], political problems, governmental and class relations, etc. According to Susan McClary, one of the most prominent apostles of the new scholarship, the construction combining gender and sexuality "is probably the most obvious aspect of feminist music criticism" [4, p. 7]. As she writes, "music is [...] concerned with the arousing and channeling of desire, with mapping patterns through the medium of sound that resemble those of sexuality" [Ibid., p. 8]. Thus, the new scholarship intends "to develop the musical semiotics of gender: a set of conventions for constructing 'masculinity' or 'femininity' in music" [Ibid.]. The same aspects are discovered by McClary everywhere, and she discusses them in the same manner as if she spoke about vulgar pornographic movies: for instance, her brief remarks concerning several of them ("the musical representations of masculine bravura or feminine seductiveness in Indiana Jones movies" [Ibid.]; her extraordinary thought about Jaws: "the vagina dentate," etc) [Ibid., p. 16]. Only a glance at the "beginning pages" of her voluminous research shows that there is something more than the astonishing imagination she possesses (both her adherents and opponents willingly accept that). What kernel is covered by that "astonishing" metaphorical stratum?

## II. The Quest for the Woman's Identity

McClary affirms that "throughout its history in the West, music has been an activity fought over bitterly in terms of gender identity." Considering these words, it is of no surprise that McClary still continues fighting bitterly, while she unmasks the real male or female identity in different musical strata. Thus, her descriptions of Beethoven's "musical sins" quickly became well-known in the public media: she points out such features as the "assaultive pelvic pounding," "sexual violence" and "the throttling, murderous rage of rapist incapable of attaining release" in his works [5, p. 7].

Later we shall return to the question of the wording and the possible reasons for McClary's wrath concerning Beethoven's rapist tendencies. Now from here it is easy to trace the woman's identity in music, which ostensibly should be the opposite of the embodiment of Beethoven's "terrible gender" in sound.

Polarizing femininity against masculinity resides in the majority of feminist writings; a woman is an entity that may not be articulated in isolation, but must be presented in opposition, in reverse, or pointed as a response to a certain other entity. It is perhaps this fact which discloses the hidden weakness of "women's uplifting" (or "butchering up," as McClary expresses it), which still needs an oblique approval by male authority [see, for instance, 8]. Thus, just as has been shown above, the feminists start their explanations about women by describing the opposing side. And certainly this makes clear immediately that discourse of the following kind leads us to quite an exposed and negative connotation of women. As Martha Minow declares, "when we identify one thing as unlike the others, we are dividing the world; we use our language to exclude, to distinguish - to discriminate" [6, p. 3]. Considering this statement, one may ask why do women provide exclusion of themselves, but not of men? The idea of female "weakness," against which feminists protest so resentfully, could be considered as nothing else but their own fantasy. According to many studies by feminists, the following dichotomy of males / females is represented in accordance to the schemes of order / chaos, intellect / feelings, spirit / body, culture / nature (these examples do not contain anything blameworthy yet; but keep reading); attraction / repulsion, wisdom / insanity, good / bad (that is the essential meaning, the overall root for the entire list), etc. I shall cite the same McClary: "the 'feminine' is weak, abnormal, and subjective; the 'masculine' strong, normal, and objective" [4, p. 10]. Judging feminist theory as a whole, the woman embodies the discourse of "otherness," which is always opposed to the masculine "rightness." And certainly the defensive stance is unavoidable and essential for feminists; this explains many of their "strange" moves.

However, these antinomies seem to be slippery, deceptive and imprecise, failing to reflect the entire variety of real phenomena of gender in their actual reality. For instance, since they accept the opposition of *culture / nature* (among the examples are those of Ellen Koskoff and Suzanne Cusick), why do they not take for granted such an opposition as civilization and culture (which we do not find among their examples), popularized by another very famous Western philosopher, and not at all containing any discrimination against women? (In his book "The

Decline of the West" Oswald Spengler demonstrates the first entity, "civilization," in quite a negative light in comparison with the second, "culture.") However, a single exception does not challenge the overall negative scheme. Thus the most misogynist studies, such as those of Otto Weininger, became fundamental for both feminists and for their deadly enemies.

Observing the aforementioned construction, I make bold to affirm that it is fallacious to follow that twofold, black-and-white construction, since the real dichotomy of gender is much more complicated; and the real goal for feminism should lie beyond the mentioned dichotomy. Later we shall discuss arguments both *pro et contra* for that version of feminism.

Among the more or less positive definitions for women, feminists choose the symbol of the "body" (as opposed to the "mind") and their favourite "pleasure" (versus men's "desire"). The discourse of the body is something underestimated by European civilization, which is why the acquittal of the body presumes for feminism a way of re-discriminating of woman herself ("resurrection of the fleshly," as McClary points out). The idea of pleasure also possesses immeasurable value and significance: just in order to emphasize that McClary devotes plenty of pages of her study, constructing the appropriate fundament which consists of many parts from the treatises of respected philosophers and theorists. "Far from finding pleasure to be trivial," Foucault then announced that "pleasure thereby becomes political rather than private – it becomes one of the principal means by which hegemonic culture maintains its power" [4, p. 29].

Political implication is another thing that stirs feminists; music is not only a sexual but a political act. That is one of the reasons for the accusation against Beethoven: his implied image as a "rapist" offends all women.

However, the constitution of these antinomies should be considered as the first stage of "gender construction" in music, provided by feminists, followed by the system of peculiar and highly detailed definitions: the bar-line is quite opposite to the round-shaped notes; the "masculine" and "feminine" cadences are defined by whether "the final chord of a phrase or section occurs on the strong beat" or "it is postponed to fall on a weak beat" [Ibid., p. 9]. Everything is this world is dissected, split in two, everywhere we are forced to recognize the feminine and masculine features.

That is why this total dichotomy is required: everything becomes simple and clear; whatever is masculine cannot be feminine. The arrow shape, release, ratio, the domination of tonality on one side; roundness, prolongation, sensibility, the enfeebling of tonality on the reverse. If there is tension and release, that presumes sexual ejaculation, and the beat of the cadence shows us whether it is man or woman who has the climax. Simply for the price of the overall condemnation of women, for the sake of fastening them to the position of "badness" (as opposed to everything that is positive, as a reminder), women's nature starts to be identifiable, visible and capable of being manipulated in the latter discourse. Since the theoretical background of that sort of feminism is apparently too weak (or "feminine," if you wish), we shall not discuss it anymore, but turn instead to the question of how this "women's discourse" is put into practice.

# III. Representations of the Female in Music.

In this section I shall concentrate on many different representations of women by Susan McClary, Ruth Solie and others.

According to the Review by Paula Higgins on McClary's study "Feminine Endings," 'McClary has a considerable gift for interpreting music as a cultural paradigm, and whether or not one accepts her metaphors and agrees with the broad conclusions she draws from them, her writing about music is passionate and compelling" [3, p. 183]. McClary's major point is to identify the tradition of women's madness, which became the essential condition for women's state of consciousness in Western opera. She concentrates on Monteverdi's operas, declaring that they created a model for depicting women in opera, failing to describe another state of affairs evident in the most famous operas, as with Verdi's and Puccini's operatic heroines, who do not embody the tradition of the insane hysterical woman on the whole. Nevertheless, her description of Bizet's Carmen might be regarded as a work of genius of originality and deserves a special attention.

But first we must cast a glance at the question of tonality / dissonance, which, surprisingly, takes on specific importance in the case of *Carmen*. McClary provides a meaningful discussion concerning Schoenberg's "Theory of Harmony" which describes a path leading to the dissolution of tonality. According to our genius of interpretation,

"the political revolutionary [Schoenberg], who boldly demands sexual license, is nowhere to be seen" [4, p. 107]. After the period of anarchy (the depiction of the mad female in his *Erwartung*), he turns back to the idea of supreme rational control: "so that anarchy would not ensue, but rather a new form of order. I may add, however, that this new order will soon begin to resemble the old, until it becomes completely equivalent to the old" [Ibid., p. 108]. According to this, not atonality, but chromaticism itself means femininity, the opposite of tonality. Equipped with these analytical tools, McClary provides her reading of opera with many piercing insights.

The melodic line of Carmen is obviously chromatic, which reflects the main heroine's state of "otherness" (see the "Habanera"). She is a real feminist heroine, the opposite of the officially ordered masculine society and conveying a woman's "bodily outlook" (which greatly corresponds to the well-known fact that confuses many researchers of her non-traditional operatic representation in dance-songs instead of arias). McClary points out Carmen's musical distinction, as opposed to the totally diatonic Micaela (not to mention her emphasized sexual morality); the same type of "lyric urgency" distinguishes Don José ("the most painful mama's boy in the history of opera") [7, p. 35]. Meanwhile, the similarly chromatic and sensual toreador is seen as the real protagonist for Carmen, notwithstanding the impossibility of their mutual atonal coexistence. "Since Carmen is chromaticism, she must be destroyed, musically as well as dramatically, by the upholder of bourgeois tonal order," Higgins writes [3, p. 181]. "Bizet's musical strategies [...] set up almost unbearable tensions that cause the listener not only to accept Carmen's death as 'inevitable,' but to desire it" [4,

Among some of the other perspicacious ideas of McClary I shall emphasize one which, in my opinion, nevertheless, I would consider very dubious. I have in mind her entirely shocking explanation of the famous scene with Carmen and José singing his "Flower Song" (about his staying in prison and "fevered longing and dread" about Carmen). The melodic line with a barely attained culmination moving gradually in several approaches up to the final burst, along with the literary text with masochistic *submissions* (discovered by McClary), leave her no doubt (and seemingly not Carmen either) that José's confession of his masturbatory

practices is represented. That is why it comes as no surprise that Carmen immediately rejects his love with anger (I would determine her action as a dramatically unpredictable move), while their distinctions and integrity to the diametrically opposed worlds of the masculine and the feminine amplify to a greater extent. "He reconverts her back into a distanced object of desire even in her presence; he manages 'to transcend' only by so doing. [...] José's moment of greatest passion is his self-absorbed monologue, his internalized metaphysical narrative that has no room for another human voice" [4, p. 59]. The thorough description by McClary does not actually disaffirm the validity of another point of view, especially since Don José, after all, has no need of being defended by women, in particular, who succeed in their counterattack.

For me it is questionable that the main content of this aria is so immutably clear and indubitably tied to his pervasive practices (while dreaming about sex with Carmen). We do not have to forget that it is she, not he, who widens the distance between them, forcing José to perform his painful confession about his hidden thoughts (she does that because of her own guileful desire to ensnare him into their gypsy journey); moreover, among the peculiarities which as far as I know all the feminists (at least, it is true of Susan McClary) obviously fail to observe, is not merely the presence of sexuality, but its quality and temper. Sexuality may be discovered everywhere in every human activity, even in any type of thought, but it is embodied very differently, depending on the specific state and grade of sublimation (a component which is not earnestly elaborated in musicology, and yet determined as being highly significant in psychoanalysis). McClary does not provide any serious proof of her statement concerning José's sexual activity. Meanwhile, the ultra-sublime spiritual gradation with its present symbol "flower" (embodying the other, vegetative type of love, which does not wither due to the spiritual energy of the true lover, whose tensioned and narrow-shaped expression is compatible not only with sexual ejaculation but also with religious prayer) by all means makes possible the appearance of the divine, supreme ecstasy of the main hero, which is not shared by the bodyoccupied Carmen.1

Nevertheless, the point touched by McClary seems to be incredibly intriguing; I am able to construe the same paradigm in many other

operatic realms (examples include numerous operas by Puccini, Verdi, etc). We may rejoice for Cavaradossi and Calaf, who sing their arias (similarly possessing the greatest and most intense culminations, narrating about their beloved women) during nights of silence, not in the presence of their lady-loves, who are not aware of the abstract signification they possess for their lovers involved in their nightmarish actions. Otherwise, Tosca, perhaps, would not die for her lover; incidentally, the figure of Turandot, who kills nice young men in memory of her violently raped mother, provides for a most appropriate example of a modern feminist; and the way in which Turandot escaped her own vicious practices is also rewarding and possible prescription for today's feminism.

# IV. Behind the Masks: Criticism and the Essential Goals of Feminism

We have dwelt enough on McClary's morbid imagery. Incidentally, the final chapters of her book (where she dwells upon ingenious rock musicians, such as Laurie Anderson and Madonna) are of the greatest interest. The possible advantages of her method I would like to turn to later, after we touch the question of the criticism against her (especially because her writings have really presented a fertile field for various attacks). "Is music inviolate? Can it withstand indefinitely our search for an explanation of its appeal?" [11, p. 11] Peter van den Toorn poses this question about this at the very beginning of his book, which establishes a positive answer to that problem. The goal to overturn McClary's position seems to be essential for van den Toorn, since both of the researchers are polarized in all possible aspects. Whereas McClary proclaims in the Introduction to her work that she is "no longer sure what MUSIC is" [4, p. 19], and that music is a political act, van den Toorn starts immediately with a declaration that "musical works can become objects of affection, faith, and love. They can speak to us indirectly, cut through to the heart without deliberation, without verbal approximation" [11, p. 11].

The entire polemics between McClary and van den Toorn lies beyond the scope of this article (taking into consideration McClary's response and many other moves by their supporters and adversaries). The major aspect of van den Toorn's criticism is to cleanse music from this ideological foam, clarifying its own meaning using the old analytical methods which van den Toorn intends to vindicate. (The

entire chapter in his work is titled "In Defense of Music Theory and Analysis.") "Beethoven the Pornographer. Beethoven the Sexist. [...] Analogous to 'vulgar Marxism,' in which man is reduced to 'economic forces,' ceaselessly scrambling for food, shelter, and reserves, McClary's feminism reduces him to his sexual needs, to a groping about for release, as it were, and then to socioeconomic arrangements by which that release is secured" [Ibid., p. 38–39]. In his polemics against McClary, van den Toorn finds many lapses in her own logical constructions (including diametrical changes of wording in citations from her earlier writings, which show her uncertainty in regards to the problems she discusses) [Ibid., p. 34]. The most convincing point of his position emerges not in criticizing the notorious McClary, but in extending her own "feminist side of the argument": "no doubt our sexualities reach into every crevice of our beings; their pulls and attractions are a part of daily life. But this, too, may be precisely the point. Diffuse and reaching everywhere, sexuality is potentially a part of everything." According to him, feminists need to elaborate their specific research methods and tools in order to establish a direct link between sexuality and music (which most likely does not exist). Otherwise, "sex and sexuality may be of no more assistance in coming to terms with music than they are in dealing with [...] other works and activities," "including athletics, cooking and cardplaying" [Ibid., p. 42–43].

As convincing and substantial enough as his explanations are for us, they undoubtedly enrage McClary and her devotees. Ruth Solie's article "What do Feminists Want?" [10] turns out to be the most vociferous among the fighters; she stems her arguments from the ostensibly remote domain of human rights and goes even further. "On this side of the curtain it's not an academic exercise: a female is raped every six minutes in this country; at least one girl in four now twelve years old in the United States will be raped at some time in her life " [10, p. 409]. I cede to Solie in competing with her regarding statistics of any kind (remarkably, how much work should she dedicate to explore the archives which she claims as the proof which has nothing to do with musicology, as it used to be when it still was the old variety). All of these proclamations are made in response to van den Toorn's plea that legislation has already solved women's problems. On the contrary, if we take into consideration Solie's position, we are given the impression that this problem has not been solved at all, having been prolonged forever; whereas statistics, as one may assume, will always be frightening and appalling (come to think about it, why not turn to the other terrifying question of why the average lifespan for men is shorter than that of women?). Incidentally, I find that Solie is correct in turning most remotely away from ordinary scholarship: she really does respond to her own main question "what do feminists want." In other words, what they really want lies distantly far beyond musicology; it seems that they merely need to establish a new variety of scholarship. According to McClary, what they wish for is quite likely to change the world. As she states in one of the final chapters of her "Feminine Endings": "Think of it. Think of it as. Think of it as a new way. Think of it as a new way of structuring time" [4, p. 147].

## V. What is Feminism For?

Inasmuch as I must disagree with McClary's entire treatise, I am absolutely all for the latter quoted statement. I would really like to believe that feminism has its own sublime purpose, which should proceed in precisely the realms announced by McClary and many others. The body is really underestimated by our intellectual civilization; and the well-known postulate by Kant "the laws should rule, but not the people" must be changed, in my opinion, to quite the opposite state of affairs. One of the novels by Ursula Le Guin narrates a story about the invasion of a remote planet by humans, where they enforced an aggressive and vicious policy. The aborigines residing on the planet were absolutely peaceful, living under matriarchy and incapable of waging war. After a series of horrible actions carried out by the invaders (raping the women, murdering the local people, etc), the aborigines learn how to fight back and kill, eradicating the humans off the planet. The last surviving of the humans, the most cruel and unprincipled of them, is captured, but they cannot kill him because of their inability to carry out one additional immoral act, even if it is required by the new law. The individual approach vanquishes the collective one ('essentialism', as Ruth Solie states in her articles); and the man, nevertheless, is allowed to live.

In this context, does feminism in musicology correspond to these ideas? Do we see anywhere any condemnation of war or cruelty in whatever guise, any new approach to individuality, or any denial of autonomous blind-law pitiless practices? If feminists do wish to achieve such goals, it is imperceptible yet in the perspective of their grandiose scenes of battles against Beethoven, Schenker, Peter van den Toorn, etc. However,

it presents a rather amusing pastime to read McClary et al; and I shall preserve the most vivid recollections of their proclamations, which I shall willingly take to my home on my Eastern European planet, dreaming about the remote and alluring idealistic feminism for the rest of my life.

#### **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Since McClary's book is abundant with many different anecdotes about her students, I would also like to share the topic of discussion which was held by my friends and me when we were students at the Conservatory. The action of blackmail carried out by Carmen towards Don José in response to his painful and sincere confession confirmed our most misogynist

expectations; it was discovered that 'the very best strings of our souls will never be recognized by materialistic and narrow-minded women sunk in ignorance.'

<sup>2</sup> Among the archives explored by her are the FBI, The Department of Justice, the Center for Women Policy Studies, etc.

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## A Discourse on the Nature of Women in Musicology

The article discusses the phenomenon of gender musicology (a trend of the so-called *new musicology*), viewed through the lenses of a foreigner, of a representative of a different national school of musicology (namely, Russian). The article questions the basic fundamental concepts of feminism in musicology – particularly the black-and-white vision of almost everything, from barlines to musical genres and forms – where we always forced to recognize masculine and feminine features. The focal point of the essay is the criticism viewpoints of Susan McClary, who is one of the founders of this discipline. Another case is constituted by the discussion of one of the most well-known and picturesque examples of feminist critique: Bizet's opera *Carmen*, which is the showcase for numerous ideas of musical feminists – namely, the juxtaposition between the body-oriented outlook of Carmen and spiritual and bourgeois outlooks, the music- and gender-related mechanism of creating the musical and conceptual 'desire' to kill Carmen, and so on. Additionally, of positions critical gender musicology are discussed – epitomized by Peter van den Toorn's critique of musical feminists, and his subsequent counteraction against their position. Finally, the essay questions the essential role and value of feminism, part of which is formed by gender musicology.

Keywords: masculinity and femininity in music, Gender Musicology, Anglo-American musicologist.

## Дискурс женской природы в музыкознании

Статья рассматривает направление гендерного музыкознания в англо-американском музыковедении; критическому рассмотрению подвергается основная теоретическая база данной дисциплины, её терминология и комплекс главных идей, а именно: «чёрно-белый» принцип разделения всего и вся на сферы маскулинного и фемининного, отсутствие более сложного и адекватного понятийного аппарата и т. п. К примеру, во всём, включая как музыкальные жанры, так и знаки нотного письма, также требуется усматривать вездесущие признаки маскулинного и фемининного. Главным объектом рассмотрения являются работы С. Макклери — их язык, концепции, получившие наибольшую известность (статья, утверждающая, что Девятая симфония Бетховена представляет собой акт изнасилования). Вместе с тем, в данной статье делается попытка рассмотреть и достоинства гендерного музыкознания, в связи с чем анализируются взгляды представителей данного направления на показательный пример — оперу «Кармен» Ж. Бизе, где явственно представлен конфликт различных подходов (идеологий) — телесной, женской, свободной, — и мужской, духовной, буржуазной. Рассматривается текущая полемика музыковедов-феминистов с П. ван-ден Торном, а также обсуждается более широкое значение феминизма в музыкознании, сегодняшнем мире и обществе.

<u>Ключевые слова</u>: маскулинность и фемининность в музыке, гендерное музыкознание, англо-американское музыкознание.

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