

## Love Stories

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### I.

My parents were professional musicians, performers.<sup>1</sup> My mother played violin, my father played clarinet and sax. They played together for years in the Dallas Symphony, in numerous chamber ensembles, and at the Century Room of the Adolphus Hotel; together, they organized chamber music concerts at the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts. As far as I could tell, they admired each other's work without reservation, and they took a steady, unexcited pleasure in their ongoing collaborations.

Their relationship, and their roles in our family's daily life, were structured in various ways, of course, but not by traditional gender roles. Fixed male and female roles had little to do with my parents' way of living. They both worked full time, and they were both fully involved in raising four children. They divided household tasks in unconventional ways, and they made important decisions through discussion and agreement.

They did not seem to reflect on their arrangement. In fact they were almost silent about it; it was just the way they lived. On the infrequent occasions when they articulated general norms of family life, they were likely to describe something much more conventional than their actual lives. When I was born, my mother experienced a brief embarrassment about her

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1. Most of this paper consists of autobiographical narrative. At the end, I step back to offer some reflections on writing this way. Someone who is uncomfortable with, or puzzled by, the autobiographical portion of the paper might want to take a look at the final section.

professional success and lied on my birth certificate, stating that she was a housewife. I was astonished, as an adult, to hear this story for the first time: her pride in her work was always obvious to me. Her laconic account of why she first liked my father was more consonant with her evident self-esteem, though it was uncharacteristically feminist. As she told me once, my father admired her musicality and treated her as a colleague, something she did not expect from men her own age.

Their friends were mostly musicians; my parents were especially comfortable around other couples made up of professional performers. My mother spent a lot of time with other women musicians, including some amateur or part-time musicians who were supported by their husbands and a number of successful women musicians who lived alone or with other women. I now see that some of them were lesbians, though no one told me that when I was growing up. I doubt such facts were mentioned among most of my mother's friends.

I knew that my parents were different from many other married couples I encountered. How did I think about it? I just accepted that musicians could be different from ordinary people. I had no useful exposure to feminist thought until I went to college; when I was living at home, I did not have the conceptual resources to recognize my parents' relationship as an evasion of the patriarchal family. I knew, too, that my mother seemed happy and successful, and that my father sometimes did, but that he was not comfortable around the businessmen, engineers, and lawyers who were my friends' fathers. He did not make much money and he had no interest in discussing sports or politics. In groups of male nonmusicians, he often lapsed into sullen silence. While I was living at home, I did not yet have the concepts to interpret all this in terms of my mother escaping the limitations of conventional femininity, or my father failing to meet standards of conventional masculinity.

So there was a contradiction between my parents' lives and the prevalent ideology of gender, complicated by my parents'

failure to challenge the ideology explicitly. In fact, as I've mentioned, my parents' explicit views on morality and marriage were conventional and conservative. At the time no one encapsulated the situation for me in those terms; nonetheless, not surprisingly, we children were puzzled. We resolved the tension in various ways. One of my sisters converted to Mormonism; she accepted, and lives, a particularly dogmatic ideology of the father as head of the household. Another sister—more spectacularly—eloped at age sixteen with a handsome man, a few years older than she, who talked loudly, cursed, drank, owned a racecar, and in other ways embodied aspects of conventional masculinity that were previously absent within my family. He liked country music; he seemed to think classical music was for sissies. Later he became very wealthy. My brother is gay, and has sometimes claimed that his homosexuality resulted from fear of being dominated by a woman like our mother. Unlike my siblings, I adopted an explicit feminist ideology and took my parents' marriage as a valuable model.

I do think that my parents had a conception of themselves and of their marriage, though I don't believe they ever articulated it—a conception that had nothing to do with feminism. They endorsed the prevailing rules, while thinking of themselves as exceptions. Their special identity as musicians set them apart from most other people, in their own eyes, and consequently allowed them to work out an egalitarian marriage without questioning mainstream gender norms.

They were performers and teachers. Their musical pleasure came mostly from performing with other good musicians. The audiences who supported this way of life were unintelligible to my parents. The customers at the Century Room seemed silly—wealthy people who spent too much for meals and drank far too much. But my parents loved to play dance music, so they loved the job. They had a distant respect for subscribers to the symphony and the opera, but they didn't like to spend time with fans or record buffs. They had little interest in famous performers or recorded music, virtually no interest in the lives

of composers or other historical information about music. They knew the classical repertory well, especially chamber music, but in a particular way: pieces were opportunities for performance, not glimpses of the past or invitations to listen.

Their relation to music was certainly not subversive. They found their way into well-established roles within existing musical institutions, and occupied them happily. It is strange, then, that this docile relationship to music supported a quiet but complete subversion of conventional gender roles, for my parents and for many of their friends. Their way of living together suggested that if you are lucky enough to be a musician, you can leave it to other people to act out the dull binaries of gender.

They were forty-four when I was born. When I knew them, they loved each other deeply, in an uneventful, calm way. I don't think their relationship had much fluctuation in its intensity, and the excitement of infatuation was absent. Their love took the form of a quiet acceptance that had apparently lost all sense of the contingency of their connection. They loved music in the same uninquisitive, almost unreflective way, accepting it, without excitement, as central to their lives. Living comfortably with them for eighteen years, I loved them that way too.

## II.

Like my parents, I was fascinated by music, but my interest took different forms. I performed as a piano soloist and as an accompanist, but I also spent a lot of time composing, analyzing, and listening. Listening, and trying to understand, were central for me. I found it hard to believe that this was not true for my parents also. Again and again I gave them records as gifts, carefully choosing something that I thought would thrill them; they would listen once, politely, or not at all. I wondered if their relation to listening had something to do with their

advanced age. But later, when I taught at Peabody Conservatory, I met dozens of adolescents who, like my parents, regarded music primarily as things for performers to do.

I listened to a lot of music; I would also listen obsessively to particular pieces. For several months I always wanted to listen to Busoni's Piano Concerto. I was fourteen. I had bought the record with no clear idea who Busoni was, though I associated him vaguely with early twentieth-century experimentation. My relation to the piece became so intense partly because the concerto was not well-known, and had just received its first recording. I felt that my attention could somehow rescue the piece. I wanted to understand everything about it, to make sense of every gesture. I memorized the sounds and pondered them. I was trying to understand the concerto as completely as I sometimes wished someone would understand me.

A passage near the beginning, just before the first entrance of the solo piano, seemed especially beautiful, though it required interpretation.

There was a dominant pedal, and then a loud return of the opening theme. The theme and the harmony were diatonic, but the voice-leading and harmony were awkward and dissonant. I thought this meant that triumphant returns might not be simple or unequivocal. A rising sequential passage, moving eventually to a cadence, was clear in its melody but seemed to lose its harmonic direction briefly. That was easy to understand: strong desire accompanied by confusion.

Then, the breathtaking moment that I always waited for: a sudden passionate melody, new to the piece, operatic in its openness, an emotional outburst with simple tremolo accompaniment. This moment seemed to assert the possibility of finding the right way to convey strong feeling, with no awkwardness and no reserve—except that the piece immediately revised the phrase into its more characteristic style, equivocal and complex. So perhaps, after all, the piece shared my painful doubts about the possibility of such direct, graceful

expressiveness. Then, not quite relevantly, the orchestra seemed to glimpse the solo piano part, abruptly abandoning its own train of thought to welcome the new character....

I wondered about the entrance of the piano, even wondering if it might be poorly written. The piano entered with a kind of blank self-assurance, as though nothing of interest might already be underway. The piano seemed confident of its own centrality, but did not seem to have anything interesting on its mind—a combination typical of adults, much resented by me and my friends. But here, as sometimes in nonmusical life, it was right to endure the piano's initial arrogance, because the piano would soon relax and engage in more flexible interactions.

My relation to the piece was intricate. In a sense, my listening was a recognition of Busoni's authority, but I also felt that this piece needed me in a way that famous pieces by Mozart or Beethoven did not. I formed interpretations in order to understand the piece, but I knew that my interpretations often mirrored my own concerns.

My relation to the piece was also physical: I loved to be in the presence of its sounds. I remember one afternoon when I wanted to listen to the piece. I was alone at home. I closed the curtains and started the recording; I lay on my back on the floor, in the dark, with my feet toward the speakers. It seemed comfortable and appropriate. I was lost in the piece when, abruptly, someone came in the front door and turned on the light—it was my brother-in-law Steve, the one who had once owned a racecar (but by now, one of his friends had stolen the car and totalled it while fleeing the police). Steve didn't say anything; he just looked at me with what I took to be unsurprised disgust and went on to the back of the house. I was upset and embarrassed. I evoked the familiar idea of Steve as an outsider to our family and told myself: "He will never understand us." But I knew that my listening posture, and my whole relation to the Busoni, would seem odd to my parents as well. I also knew that my embarrassment came from a fear of being, in some

sense, understood too well: Steve's presence had given me a glimpse of myself from a perspective of normative masculinity, and I could not tell whether I now found myself ridiculous.

### III.

In my first year of college teaching I had some interesting experiences with a strange student. Scott was a fourth-year music major with poor grades in music courses. He had little interest in tonal music and no performance skills. He did poorly in theory and ear training. He wrote badly and was inarticulate in conversation. Working with a synthesizer, he made tapes of little instrumental compositions in popular idioms, but they were unambitious and uninteresting. It was not clear why he was majoring in music.

But he did love some music very much. He was preoccupied with Brian Eno and Robert Fripp. He also loved the sound of post-Webern serial music—an unusual taste, and one that he pursued in isolation. I tried to work with him on some twelve-tone composing, but his problems with notation were discouraging. He seldom knew how the music he wrote would sound and he had trouble using simple rhythmic notation accurately.

Surprisingly, I found that Scott was an excellent, imaginative partner for free improvisation on two keyboards. He could give rapt attention to moment-to-moment interactions in sound. He heard all my pitches accurately, easily placing his own pitches in whatever relation to mine he wanted. (This would have surprised his ear training teachers.) He could establish, sustain, and inflect vivid textures. He was comfortable with ongoing dissonance and with a floating, non-metrical, meditative temporality.

Our most engrossing tape came out of his interest in Webern's *Concerto for Nine Instruments*. Scott had been listening to the piece. I showed him that the row consists of 0-1-4

trichords and suggested we try a two-piano improvisation using such trichords as a way of approaching the concerto.

We played for forty-five minutes, the length of a cassette. I wish I could play the tape for you, to let you hear the qualities of the interaction. I would play you the end, the last two minutes. Just before, we had fallen into a comfortable pattern that recurred throughout the session, Scott playing slow, supportive chords while I made an upper register melody. This started to feel stale to me, so I decided to jolt us out of the pattern by repeating a harsh middle-register chord, in effect asking Scott to invent some appropriate response. (When I listen now, the time that I hang onto that chord seems unendurably long, with short blurts from Scott above and below, but, painfully, no coherent way for him to join my activity.) Then, abruptly, Scott drew me away into a high-register passage, quiet and tender, exchanging trichords (they sound like clusters)...and then, one of those amazing telepathic moments that come up in improvisation: four high-register chords, with pauses between, each made up of two trichords, one from Scott, one from me...the whole high register passage could be mistaken for the playing of one entranced player....

Our nonmusical interactions were never so empathetic. Usually Scott was shy and skittish, and when we talked I was often unsure whether we understood each other.

We never discussed this improvisation in detail. I wanted to; Scott did not. We had talked about taped improvisations before, but this one seemed different. He told me that he really enjoyed listening to the tape, and that he and his girlfriend liked to listen to it and discuss it. I was amused: it was as though such intimacies had to be placed in a heterosexual setting for interpretation and containment.<sup>2</sup> "For heaven's sake,"

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2. It also may have seemed necessary to protect the exchange on the tape from translation into our hierarchical teacher-student idiom. I felt at the time that both motives were present (but given our relative lack of rapport in verbal communication, anything here is conjectural).

I thought, “it’s only music!” But I knew that was wrong, that I had no clear idea what it is to be “only music”—especially when the music-making involved two people setting aside conventional styles and genres to work out their own private understanding.

*I have written autobiographically, but not because I think you are interested in the details of my life. I wrote these passages for the conference “Feminist Theory and Music III” in Riverside, California (June 1995).<sup>3</sup> I originally expected to present a more general theoretical paper on parallels between musicality and sexuality, but when it was time to write, theoretical language failed me, or I failed to find the right theoretical language. A concrete, anecdotal style seemed to provide an unforced, accurate way to write about music, gender, and sexuality (among other things); I thought my use of a concrete, “untheoretical” style to address those issues, not my life as such, might interest my original audience, and perhaps you.*

*But this autobiographical text is not antagonistic to theory; rather, it makes a particular use of theory. I conceived it as a communication among people who already share certain theoretical texts about music, gender, and sexuality. I knew many people in my audience would recognize the influence of Philip Brett and Suzanne Cusick, and I knew that some people would also remember my earlier papers on gender and music.<sup>4</sup> I wanted to explore the idea that those texts, and others, have built up a shared space within which nontheoretical language— anecdotes, for instance— can have a different resonance (and not only my nontheoretical language, but that of anyone else in the space: I wanted to*

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3. At that conference, and afterward, this paper received many encouraging and thought-provoking comments. For valuable conversation, I am especially indebted to Raphael Atlas, Paul Attinello, Philip Brett, Suzanne G. Cusick, Marion A. Guck, Katharine Eisaman Maus, Susan McClary, Judith Peraino, William Pinar, David Rees, Mary Ann Smart, Ruth Solie, and Laura Yim.

*exemplify a kind of thinking and writing that other people could use). Now, in print, the material may read differently depending on the extent to which you share my context of other articulations about music, gender, and sexuality. But much of what I intended in writing is clear enough, I believe, even outside that shared space for which I first wrote.*

*The first passage differs from the others: it is more about other people, less about me, and takes the form of a general encapsulation of a relationship, rather than a single, fragmentary story. (Of course, one is tempted to encapsulate others, while regarding oneself as uniquely resistant to a summarizing description—a fact about subjectivity that my paper faithfully displays.) It is also less directly about subjective experience, more about institutions—musicality and gender. The description draws on Philip Brett's work: writing about the pervasive presence of homosexual musicians, Brett has suggested that people who occupy the role "musician" can deviate from mainstream sexual norms, provided they do so unobtrusively. According to the ideology Brett describes, a natural, ineluctable talent creates a special vocation, and with it a combination of marginality and freedom. In a similar way, the role "musician" allowed my parents to deviate from gender norms, shedding many of the constraints of conventional heterosexuality.*

*The other two vignettes are, obviously I hope, about parallels of musicality and sexuality, and interactions between them, and about tensions between some musical experiences and normative masculinity. I wanted analogies to sexual experience to be right on the surface, blatant, but in a way that would only be coarsened by using words like "narcissism," "masturbation," "femme," "bottom," and "homosexual" that the stories should, nonetheless, evoke. That*

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4. See Philip Brett, "Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet," and Suzanne G. Cusick, "On a Lesbian Relation with Music: A Serious Effort Not to Think Straight," both in Philip Brett, Gary Thomas, and Elizabeth Wood, eds., *Queering the Pitch* (New York: Routledge, 1993); also my papers "Masculine Discourse in Music Theory," *Perspectives of New Music* 31 (1994): 264-293 and "Hanslick's Animism," *Journal of Musicology* 10 (1992): 273-292.

*felt, to me, like richness and precision; you will, of course, evaluate my writing independently of my intentions.*

*But the strategy of writing indirectly about musicality and sexuality, implying rather than stating, bears some resemblance to that terrible discretion that muffles and closets sexuality. Let the list in the preceding paragraph stand as the uncloseting of my analogies.*