Growing Up Female(s):
Retrospective Thoughts on Musical Preferences and Meanings

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The interface between feminism and various disciplines provides a forum within which many previously silenced voices can be heard. Within musicology, this interrelationship has warranted a rethinking of the way one both objectively and subjectively approaches/listens to/analyzes music. The present work seeks to bring together perspectives from both feminism and musicology in order to articulate notions of consumption, interpretation, and performance in the musical lives of two women.¹

¹ This paper was first presented at the conference “Feminist Theory and Music: Toward a Common Language,” Minneapolis, MN, June, 1991. In preparing this article, the authors have sought to replicate the performative nature of the original aural presentation which included the interplay of their voices as well as playing taped excerpts of musical examples. Accordingly, the presenters’ voices are represented in print by contrasting alignments and typefaces.

² We would like to thank Professor Beverley Diamond for her encouragement and helpful insight in preparing this work.
The work of feminist theorists in another of the expressive arts—namely the visual arts—locates our study. At issue is the musical parallel of what these feminist theorists have defined as the “male gaze”: a unit of analysis that informs much of their work. The musical counterpart of this idea has been articulated by Beverley Diamond who suggests that just as the visual may be seen to be tied to gendered definitions of “the gaze,” so too may the ability to hear music be articulated through a framework sensitive to the concept of gender.³ Diamond states that:

The strong essentialist arguments of many schools of music critics and music theorists—those that build an argument on the undeniable abstraction of many of the parameters of musical language, especially instrumental musical language, posit the meaning in music as ‘integral’ and independent of contextual considerations. In place of this I query whether we hear and explain what we hear with a ‘male ear,’ the musical analogy of the ‘male gaze’ identified in feminist film and art history studies.⁴

The concept of difference as suggested by Diamond is important, not only in terms of male and female ways of hearing and responding, but also in that sameness must not be presupposed amongst varying women and men. In turn, our questioning of the musical analogy of the ‘male ear’ allows the possibility of hearing and explanation from a female perspective—a ‘female ear’—that is itself pluralistic. It is the apparent singularity and homogeneity by which the consumption of musical sound and musical experiences within a context of power relations has been articulated that underlies our concerns. Assuming that these relations of power inform part of a creative lifelong process, our methodology addresses the relationship between power and

⁴. Diamond, p. 2.
music, and the impact it has had on the lives of the informants in our study. Through the conjuncture, albeit an uneasy one, of perspectives from feminism and musicology, we have been able to create a space within our academic discourse to address these issues.

By locating our argument within this space we have attempted to define the subject of the gaze as no longer centered, bounded or seen in relation to an ‘other.’ As Vicki Kirby states in her “Capitalizing Difference: Feminism and Anthropology”:

the problem becomes one of just how to conceptualize difference differently. A critique of the binarism which harnesses thought into an either/or division must ask whether difference can be understood outside an oppositional economy. In other words, must difference (cultural, sexual, class, etc.) always be understood or ‘othered’ as the complement, inversion or negation of/from a defining reference point (Western, male, white, bourgeois, etc.)?

Accordingly, from our informants’ anecdotes, we look for the ways they articulate their differences differently. In our analysis of these vignettes of musical experiences, their musical choices may be seen to be both resistant to hegemonic forces around them and on the other hand, ironically, as part of the reproducing forces that shape their lives.

During the course of a seminar on music and gender in 1989, our informants attended sessions which examined the construction of gender in

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children’s songs and games. One session in particular was spent viewing a collection of video tapes of children’s interactions within music classroom settings. Our informants spontaneously shared recollections of their own childhood experiences. One of our informants recalled skipping rhymes performed exclusively by girls’ groups, yogi elastic games, and tunes accompanied by ball-bouncing. She was surprised to find through these conversations with her colleague that assumptions she held regarding the universality of these girls’ experiences were unfounded. They did not have parallel recollections. In fact, they found that many of their experiences were quite dissimilar both with regard to the repertoire of songs and social interaction.

In light of this dialogue, it became apparent that the plurality of their responses could not be accommodated by the concept of difference as understood from the literature on gender and music available to the authors. The sources presented instead a picture of homogeneity in female musical experience seen in negation to male, which, in turn, served to perpetuate the binary opposition of male and female. Simon Frith’s The Sociology of Rock serves as an example of an analysis of music consumption carried out during the time of our informants’ adolescent years. In this work, Frith makes a clear distinction between ‘girls’ and ‘boys’ culture in the 1970s: whereas boys participate in “complex and hi-fi” music, girls have less interest in this form; they play about on guitars but are generally more interested in singing than in instrumental music production. As a result, Frith suggests a greater degree of individuality in boys who actively explore their own creativity. Girls’ culture, however, is described as passive, with a remarkable degree of homogeneity.

To challenge stereotypical notions of girls' culture as articulated by authors such as Frith, our methodology consisted of first, asking our informants to produce a list of ten musical selections from various genres that figured prominently in their socialization and second, interviewing our informants based upon these selections. Some of these experiences as recounted to us by our informants form the basis of our analysis. These vignettes are considered in light of notions concerning difference within relations of power which include resistance, conformity, and negotiation.

To begin, Informant A recalled an important musical experience beginning at the age of twelve. She talked about her life at this time as divided between wanting to be included in girls' groups and yet an awkwardness with such a relationship. Belonging exclusively to a girls' group in this informant's opinion meant being excluded from interacting with boys, which was important for her at the time. Music proved to be a way into the girls' groups for it allowed her to participate selectively. This informant's first musical selection was taken from the repertoire of a popular teeny-bop Scottish band, the Bay City Rollers. For a pre-teen at this time, acceptance into this fan club meant vocal participation in the music, adopting a style of dress and participation in ownership of the group's records, posters, and memorabilia. As my informant stated, "I really enjoyed singing their music, collecting information on the group's members from teen magazines and plastering my walls with pictures." The text from the first musical example, the Bay City Rollers' "Rock and Roll Love Letter," is provided:
Hey says the poet, dear brother poet too,
These tears are words I make, I wanna be with you,
‘Cause I need to spend my body, I’m a music makin’ man,
I know this can release it like this amplifier can...
This is my Rock ‘n Roll Love Letter to you (repeat)
Gonna sign it, gonna seal it, gonna mail it away,
Gonna mail it today.7

The way in which this informant described her experience suggests that she met the criteria of Frith’s definition of one who conforms in girls’ culture. Singing was an integral activity for her, and, like the girls described in Frith’s studies, singing took precedence over instrumental activities. This form of participation by girls seems to be interpreted by Frith as a lack of interest in the music itself, a perhaps unfortunate result of girls’ culture which “starts and finishes in the bedroom.”8 According to Frith, this activity prepares the girl for marriage, the adolescent female’s true career.9 From this informant’s recollection, however, her singing experience was not perceived to be disempowering and as a young lesbian, the connection to marriage was, for her, not relevant. Jennifer Giles and John Shepherd have examined this issue of empowerment through singing. Their 1986 study, for example, looks at individual music consumption as experienced and interpreted by four English-speaking girls in Montreal,

7. These are the lyrics as recounted by the informant. As she recalled, the exact words were not known to the members of her peer group, but this was not an important issue when performing the song.
Quebec.\textsuperscript{10} In particular, they discuss two important steps in this process of musical empowerment: 1) the internalization of music within their bodies and 2) claiming ownership of an important component of musical production—namely vocalizing—as their own. First, with regard to the issue of music within the body, Giles and Shepherd posit that sound (and therefore the musical text) is:

the only major channel of communication that actively vibrates inside the body...sound is felt in addition to being heard...it is, in the form of popular music, a way in which we possess others and are possessed by others...[The four girls were aware]...of these empowering and possessive qualities of music.”\textsuperscript{11}

Accordingly, the practice of singing popular music by girls is seen here as an empowering experience; it is a felt musical practice which connects the group.

The second issue addresses ownership of the music. Frith attributes girls' singing to their lack of interest in instrumental performing; they were more interested in the words than were boys. From this statement, Frith seems to imply that singing is a less valued activity that is associated with females. Adopting the practice of singing, however, has been explained more positively by Giles and Shepherd who describe it as “a rejection of an encompassing masculine identity...the


\textsuperscript{11} Giles and Shepherd, p. 21.
exclusion of a foreign, encompassing and potentially threatening musical reality is matched by an active affirmation of self through the ‘other’ (the text) of music.”

Again, Giles and Shepherd acknowledge resistance, not disempowerment, through vocalizing.

Frith also identifies male-objectification as a criterion of girls’ culture and claims that this form of idol worship—which includes activities such as purchasing magazines and hanging posters—unites young females. *Informant A* agreed that the activities united her group of friends; they were, however, more important for providing an entry into the group rather than solely for idol worship.

In their article “Girls and Subcultures,” Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber identify a number of other “negotiative processes” at work with regard to “idol-worshipping.” These include: 1) few restrictions in association with this commercially-based subculture. As the informant stated, “one only needed to sing and purchase relevant merchandise to be part of the group”; and 2) few personal risks, i.e. sexual risks, once a member of the group. *Informant A* felt that sexual activity which seemed to her to be part of the image of heavy rock groups was not a requirement for her membership in following the Rollers; her status as a Rollers fan sheltered her from this peer

pressure. In discussing the sexual implications of the idol-fan relationship, McRobbie and Garber state:

A function of the social exclusiveness of such groupings is to gain private, inaccessible space...teeny bopper subcultures could be interpreted as ways of buying time, within the commercial mainstream, from the real world of sexual encounters. 14

Participation in "girls' culture" allows for the exploration of different personal spaces than those occupied by boys. Informant A's selective participation points to how through resistance, she established her personal space within teeny-bop culture.

Our second informant, Informant B, recalled that as a fifteen-year old her time was split between her music studies—therefore, listening mainly to European art music—and trying to be a "normal" high school student: "I was always set apart from my peers because I was so involved in performing and studying music. In one way, I wanted to be part of the girls' group but on the other hand, the kinds of things they liked to do didn't really interest me." This is significantly different from the experience articulated by Informant A. Whereas in her situation, music provided a way into the group, for Informant B, music provided an escape from involvement in stereotypical girls' culture. Informant B stated that she preferred to listen to solo female acoustic artists. This performer-fan relationship is different from the idol-fan relationship described by Informant A: an identification rather than an objectification.

Informant B recollected experiences at two different points in her life that hinged upon one particular song. Carly Simon’s “That’s the Way I’ve Always Heard It Should Be,” describes the expectations of being “female”—as someone’s child, lover, wife, and mother:

You say we’ll soar like two birds through the clouds,
But soon you’ll cage me on your shelf.
I’ll never learn to be just me first, by myself.
Well, O.K. it’s time we moved in together,
and raised a family on our own, you and me.
Well that’s the way I’ve always heard it should be
You want to marry me,
we’ll marry.

For this informant, the female roles defined in this song coincided with those she had been socialized to accept. It is what McRobbie states as “the way girls experience[d] all the pressures imposed on them to aspire to a model of femininity and how they live[d] this ideology on a day-to-day basis.” In addition, the informant discussed the vocal quality and instrumentation of Simon’s songs, which she described as light and breathy, with no direct, pointed sounds. The effect, as the informant explained, was non-threatening and adhered to her image of femininity. McRobbie and Frith concur with this argument when they discuss solo female artists, stating that “whatever the ability, integrity and toughness of [these musicians], their musical appeal, the way they were sold, reinforced...the qualities traditionally linked with female singers—sensitivity, passivity, and sweetness.” By following these female artists as opposed to popular teen idols or groups that would require more active participation, Informant B marginalized her position within her own peer

16. Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, “Rock and Sexu-

group, yet remained safely within the boundaries of female expectations.

This particular Carly Simon song was brought up again in the informant’s account of her life at age twenty. At that time, she began to play popular music herself as a solo performer in clubs in her hometown. She began her first set of every performance with Simon’s song. As she stated: “singing this song first made me feel more comfortable in that situation, and the audience accepted this image and the sound right away.” Yet at this stage in her life, she was no longer comfortable with the stereotypical image expected of her and the song became a vehicle to subvert the image. The personae of the solo female artists became a site of empowerment rather than conformity, for in them Informant B described finding her strength. She saw the women as aggressive/strong figures that were able to successfully carve out a niche for themselves in the male-dominated world of recorded music. The irony noted by the informant lay in the artists’ negotiation of asserting their strengths on the one hand, and maintaining their femininity on the other. As Informant B stated: “the irony lay in the fact that someone like Rikki Lee Jones could appear on stage complete with an oversized man’s cap, blue jeans and a cigarette in hand—an appearance that I was socialized to define as more of a masculine image. Yet she sounded very feminine to me.” The artists challenged the notion of women’s passivity in music and stereotypical notions of “femaleness” that imposed uniformity on their lives. No longer did the phrase “That’s The Way I’ve Always Heard It Should Be” evoke notions of compliance for this informant. She had moved to a different stage in her identity as a female.

Informant A’s second selection was significant for her at the age of seventeen. Enrolled in a university music program, she recalls being
taken by Stravinsky's music, particularly his Symphony in C. She immediately responded to the first movement and its sonata form features, and sought to understand why Stravinsky's interpretation of sonata form was so fascinating. This informant recalled a metaphor related to her which influenced her initial perception of this work. A classmate saw sonata form as an appropriate model for life. It is in three stages: the exposition (youth and education), development (marriage, parenthood and career) and recapitulation (retirement). After painstakingly making a chart that mapped out the music's formal development, Informant A felt that this work in particular reflected the way in which her life was going to develop as a lesbian: it could be graphed within a rigid box (analogous with her strict environment) and sections “developed” but not in the traditional sense (family or children). Finally, and most importantly, she didn’t sense closure at the end of sections. Instead, she heard juxtaposed areas which functioned as interruptions—a pattern which she thought was inevitable in her life. She recalled being struck by Edward Cone's analysis of the work: he describes it as having a “peculiar phrase structure: extended, repetitive developments over an ostinato...clear phrase divisions [are] achieved by interruption and even by interpolation.”

patterns which, as noted by Alan Lessem, “relentlessly disrupt continuity and closure.” Informant A sensed continuity in Stravinsky’s work, but was more taken by its discontinuity; his manipulation of sonata form seemed more befitting as a musical model for life than any she had experienced previously.

The second piece recalled as especially important in Informant B’s experiences was Rachmaninoff’s Elegie, Op. 3, no. 1. At this time, she was a student in a university music performance program. As she recalled, “the Rachmaninoff was chosen for many reasons. First, it was a way for me to negotiate my place in a male-centered environment. The piece was demanding emotionally, but not so much technically. I liked it because I used my entire body in performing it. The sound was heavy, the tone was full and required the full weight of my arms.” Recall Shepherd’s notion of the empowering nature of singing in the use of the body as an instrument. His definition is extended in this informant’s account to articulate the notion of the body joined with an instrument as equally empowering as singing, but in a different way. In singing Carly

Simon on the one hand and playing Rachmaninoff on the other, Informant B felt that she could negotiate her mediation of vulnerability and strength within the female image that she wanted to create for herself.

She went on to discuss the ironic fact that the pieces she preferred did not conform to the sound she thought of as “feminine.” Yet this musical preference was in direct contrast to the kinds of music she played away from the confines of the music school. By moving back and forth between what she was socialized to accept as a model of femininity on the one hand, and what did not comply on the other, she created what she later described as a fragmented persona rather than a unified whole. From the examples illustrated by this informant, one sees that it is critical to recognize her plurality as a woman. To quote Luce Irigaray, “‘she’ is indefinitely other in herself.”

For Informant B, music helped develop this pluralistic expression—she strategically chose music which resisted forces of containment in her life. Irigaray provides an insight for understanding the process articulated by Informant B when she addresses a similar issue with respect to women’s words: “one would have to listen with another ear, as if hearing an ‘other meaning’ always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them.”

Within the fixity of the music institution, Informant B was able to negotiate her space.

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20. Irigaray, p. 29.
The various examples presented illustrate that there exists a multiplicity of female differences and demonstrate the complexity of the 'female ear.' Within each of the particular moments we have described, we have found that our informants' choices both upheld and manipulated the existing structures of music and negotiated space within the relations of power. It is only through the conjoining of musicological and feminist thought that we have been able to locate these positions. Due to this rethinking of music consumption, interpretation and performance as women, we have tried to make audible what has previously been, for our informants, silenced.

It is usually a feature of qualitative research to conceal the identities of your informants, and we acknowledge this responsibility. The model which has developed from our work, however, modifies this criterion and makes necessary the disclosure of our informants’ identities.

Karen Pegley, Informant A

Virginia Caputo, Informant B
Works Cited


