

Week 15

May 14, 2020

WHY MIGHT MUSIC HAVE A SPECIAL
RELATIONSHIP WITH GENDER AND
SEXUALITY?

OR OFFER AN UNIQUE MEANS OF
THINKING ABOUT GENDER AND
SEXUALITY?

(IN A WAY DIFFERENT THAN LITERATURE, FOR
EXAMPLE?)

**There are lots of potential answers, but we'll focus on
7 ways.**

1. MUSIC, GENDER, & SEXUALITY

- music—from genres to styles to performer expectations to **instruments** and beyond—is gendered in complex ways
- gender adds layers of complexity to sexuality in almost all contexts (as do race, ethnicity, and class)
- ideas of access and privilege operate *both* on a basis of gender (men often privileged over women in musical genres) and sexuality (normative sexualities often privileged over nonnormative)

Beyond these generalities:

Music in Western culture
has historically often been characterized as non-verbal,
resisting meaning, even irrational
= **music has historically been feminized**

2. MUSIC HAS HAD A HISTORICAL CONNECTION WITH HOMOSEXUALITY

In the 19th century, at the time that “homosexuality” is arising as a medicalized, essentializing, abstract, minoritizing label for a set of practices,

- “musicality” or “musical” comes to have a close connection with this emerging concept of homosexuality

A few examples:

“I should like to listen to a little music this evening....I pay five hundred francs for the evening, which may perhaps be of interest to one of your friends, if you have any in the band.” Baron de Charlus to the soldier Morel, Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*

“Mme Verdurin would then give them adjoining rooms and, to put them at their ease, would say: “If you want to have a little music, don’t worry about us: The walls are as thick as a fortress, you have nobody else on your floor, and my husband sleeps like a log.”
Ibid

“Is he musical?” —Mid-20th-century code-word for a homosexual man.

“When I was at school, I was terrified of my musical gift; I hated it, and did my utmost to suppress it, because I thought it was that which made me different from the other boys. I loathed being “different”..... Tortured composer-hero Dennis, writing to his lesbian friend Antoinette, *Despised and Rejected* (A.T. Fitzroy [Rose Allatini], 1918).

2. MUSIC HAS A HISTORICAL CONNECTION WITH HOMOSEXUALITY

A. At this moment (late 19th into the 20th century), a lot of things are seen as interconnected:

emotional instability = tenderness = nervousness = disposition to homosexuality =
disposition to musicality

(We can think of the writings of Havelock-Ellis and Carpenter or the works of Oscar Wilde and Marcel Proust—all of these come from this historical moment)

B. Indeed, there are interesting analogies in the methods of discussing sexuality and music in terms of a nature versus nurture argument. We're likely all fairly familiar with this argument in terms of sexuality.

There's the essentialist position: you're born a certain way. There's the constructivist position (more like Foucault): culture and social relations produce sexuality.

In terms of music, we are also likely familiar with a similar question, but framed as talent versus skill. Are you *born* a musician (talent) or do you become one (skill)?

2. MUSIC HAS A HISTORICAL CONNECTION WITH HOMOSEXUALITY

C. Looking at this 19th century idea of emotion = musicality = disposition to homosexuality, we can also extrapolate a great *utility* for music

If music is emotion or emotional, it may provide an important lifeline to express emotion, to freely express desire and other feelings.

What are potential results of this music = emotion idea?

1. Music could be *particularly* accommodating to those who have trouble expressing feelings in everyday life
2. Music could be *particularly* useful for those whose feelings are usually invalidated by broader society
3. Music could be particularly useful in expressing emotion because you can “reveal” without completely revealing (remember, music is vague, intangible, etc —see slide #3 again).

3. MUSIC'S VAGUENESS

- music's meaning is often described as vague, unstable, hard to pin down, implicit (not explicit), transitory, intangible, elusive, ineffable, slippery, etc
- even the experience of space and **time** in music seem to offer some sort of "other" experience, apart from everyday life
- through its vagueness, music might be interpretable in different ways
- this vagueness is applicable (in different ways) for both music without words **and** music with words

Music and Meaning: ????

Does music have meaning? Yes....

but how do we interpret it?

“reading music”

Listened to excerpt from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.....

#1: This is what **one** scholar heard in this piece:

The point of recapitulation in the first movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony unleashes one of the most horrifyingly violent episodes in the history of music...we witness the emergence of the initial theme and its key out of a womblike void, and we hear it collapse twice more into that void. It is only by virtue of the subject's constant violent self-assertion that the void can be kept at bay: cadence in the context of this movement spells instant death—or at least loss of subjective identity.

Music and Meaning: ????

So music, even with words, does not have a fixed meaning or a universal meaning.

What might this lack of concreteness have to do with gender and sexuality?

“Music has been defined as mystery and miasma, as implicitness rather than explicitness, and so we have hid inside music: in music we can come out without coming out, we can reveal without saying a word.”

Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (1993)

4. MUSIC IS EMBODIED

How?

It is literally experienced with the body, viscerally

- A. We feel the rhythm as listeners, we move our bodies
- B. Performers: music is made by bodies
(some have argued music does not exist without a body producing it)
- C. The voice: a particularly special case. A voice comes from inside the body cavities (seems magical, unreal, difficult to explain because it is both embodied and invisible)

5. MUSIC STRADDLES A PUBLIC/PRIVATE DIVIDE

Unlike some other forms of art, we often experience music both alone and in public

- A. We might listen (or play music) privately
- B. We also might attend concerts or perform in public

If we experience music in both private and public spaces, how does that affect how we express our gender and sexuality through music in private versus public?

Anything might change if someone is watching?

Might we hide musical tastes? Feign interest in other musics?

6. MUSIC ITSELF AS A SENSUAL, SEXUAL PRACTICE THAT OFFERS EROTIC PLEASURE

Suzanne Cusick's theory

Cusick:

- explores how music allows for a rethinking of sexual pleasure as *nongenital*
- might sexual pleasure be a way of expressing or enacting relationships of intimacy through physical pleasure shared, accepted, or given?
- if so, could the *most important* way we express or enact identity through physical pleasure actually be in **musical activity**
- **could music BE sex?**

7. MUSIC ITSELF AS A SENSUAL, SEXUAL PRACTICE THAT CREATES NON-NORMATIVE SUBJECTS

Judith Peraino's discussion

Peraino:

The history of Western music is one of sexual anxiety, ambivalence,
negotiation, repression

Now that we have these 7 reasons in mind
(why music plays such a unique role in considering gender and
sexuality)

Have most music scholars tended to focus on these issues in
the past?

No!

Music scholars of the past focused on music's supposed:

1. formal structure: structure, form, harmony, chords
2. autonomy (music should have no *cultural* meaning)
3. universality: same meaning for everyone
4. intellectuality: music should relate to the *mind/intellect*, not the
body

(note that these are all convenient ways to *avoid* talking about gender or sexuality)

Why?

Why such a disconnect between music's powerful connection to gender and sexuality
and what music scholars studied?

Lots of potential reasons, but one is:

Paradoxically, because of music's powerful connection with expressing emotion and due to the connection with (in the middle of 20th century)
musicality = suspected homosexuality,

the power of the closet, the importance of deniability,
became all the more intense