

## An Interview with Professor Susan McClary: The Development of Research on Gender and Music

**Susan McClary**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7051-9295>

Case Western Reserve University, Department of Musicology

[susan.mcclary@case.edu](mailto:susan.mcclary@case.edu)

**Sam de Boise**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9067-9496>

Örebro University, School of Music, Theatre and Art

[sam.deboise@oru.se](mailto:sam.deboise@oru.se)

INTERVIEW

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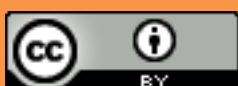
**Abstract:** Susan McClary is a Professor of Musicology and the author of *Feminine Endings*, one of the most influential books on feminist musicology, both in majority–English–speaking and non–majority English–speaking countries. Throughout her distinguished career she has addressed questions of how gender and sexuality relate to the study and analysis of classical and popular musics. This interview focuses on how she initially became interested in the field, reflections on research on music and gender as well as her analysis of key theoretical and empirical areas for the future of research. The interview was conducted in May 2018 by Sam de Boise (Örebro University, Sweden).

**Keywords:** *Feminine Endings*; women composers; gender and music, sexuality and music.

### ENTREVISTA COM A PROFESSORA SUSAN MCCLARY: O DESENVOLVIMENTO DA PESQUISA SOBRE MÚSICA E GÊNERO

**Resumo:** Susan McClary é professora de Musicologia e autora de *Feminine Endings*, um dos livros mais influentes sobre musicologia feminista, tanto em países onde o inglês é o idioma majoritário, quanto nos países não anglófonos. Ao longo de sua distinta carreira, ela abordou questões sobre como gênero e sexualidade se relacionam com o estudo e análise de músicas clássicas e populares. Esta entrevista enfoca como, inicialmente, ela se interessou por esse campo, reflexões sobre as pesquisas sobre música e gênero, bem como sua análise das principais áreas teóricas e empíricas para o futuro da pesquisa. A entrevista foi realizada em maio de 2018 por Sam de Boise (Örebro University, Suécia).

**Palavras–chave:** *Feminine Endings*; mulheres compositoras, gênero e música, sexualidade e música.



# An Interview with Professor Susan McClary: The Development of Research on Gender and Music

Susan McClary, Case Western Reserve University, susan.mcclary@case.edu

Sam de Boise, Örebro University, sam.deboise@oru.se

## 1. Introduction

**Sam de Boise:** Academically speaking, who have been the most significant influences and what have been the most significant theoretical or empirical developments for you during the course of your work?

**Susan McClary:** The most important, to me, was Rose Subotnik and her work on Adorno and Foucault. I was finishing my dissertation at Harvard, and we never talked about music, except to put chord labels under things. I had been searching for ways to talk about meaning in music, and there just weren't very many sources. I didn't know where to turn to get that kind of information. In 1975 I met Rose at the University of Chicago; she had just published on Adorno and would soon publish on Foucault. I was married at the time to a professional philosopher, but of course those kinds of books didn't make it onto the bookshelves of people in analytic philosophy. So what Adorno did was to give me ways of thinking about how music itself was connected to social tensions and how to get at those. I would say that he is probably the most important influence on me. Now I know that people who work on popular music just want to keep as far away from Adorno as possible, and what he had to say about jazz was ridiculous. I can try explain it this way: he was in Germany, he felt that the ability of his colleagues to think long term was being destroyed by musics that were based on the body, on the present moment. But he said some horrendously racist things about popular music along the way. When it comes to classical music, though, he really knew how to get at what was at issue, and that has been tremendously important to me.

From Foucault, I learned how to think about gender and sexuality, which we had previously said were subjective. How to understand those as having histories: once you realise these aren't universals, that we are all inserted into various historical moments, in the ways that gender and sexuality are lived and understood, then so much of what we do in popular music, of course, but also in classical music, becomes available. We can talk about those not just as 'look that's my opinion, don't worry about me,' but you can actually trace histories of those things. I was working at the time more or less in a vacuum, except for Women's Studies programs, and those were the two scholars who allowed me to make the connections that are just fundamental to everything I do. I don't go back to them a lot; I took what I wanted from Adorno and Foucault and ran with them. But I couldn't really do what I've done without the intellectual models of those two philosophers.

**Sam de Boise:** So it's fair to say that you combined more structuralist–Marxist perspectives and then more discursive poststructuralist approaches coming from Foucault which have been hugely influential in your work and in the field more generally. Given that the field has changed since *Feminine Endings*, what do you consider to be the biggest shifts in academic work on music and gender today compared to when you first started writing?

**Susan McClary:** I think that, first of all, somebody had to break down the door in musicology. When I started working on the ideas that ended up in *Feminine Endings*, it was because I wanted to be able to talk about social meaning in music. You have to go back to when I was being trained in the 1970s. I was at Harvard, which was supposed to be one of the best graduate programs around. Music did not have meaning; words had meaning. You could talk about a libretti, you could talk about song texts, but music itself you could only approach as chords and forms. I wanted to be able to bridge that, oddly enough, not for purposes of gender, but because I wanted to be able to argue that the musical procedures of the 16th century, which I was working on, made sense for the 16th Century, that they weren't just 'rough drafts' leading up the great 'crowning glory' that was tonality. It seemed to me, as we were going around in the 1980s with the mantra of 'class, race and gender', that it was much easier to talk about how music produces representations of gender than of class. I mean how do you get at class? You can, but it's much more difficult, and gender seemed to be waving its hands and saying 'here we are!': in opera most obviously, in popular music, but also in instrumental music. And I wanted to crack open this idea of 'absolute music' where instrumental music had no meaning: it was just transcendent, it was ineffable, 'keep your hands off of this stuff'. Gender seemed, to me, to be the best ways to crack that open.

That's really where the pushback came, when I pushed that. It wasn't that I was talking about gender – other people were talking about women in opera, women composers – but they weren't taking on the very centre of what we were dealing with, which was this great ineffable, absolute music. So to start poking at that was very taboo, and I got death threats; there were times when the police had to move me out of my apartment. I still live occasionally get reverberations from that time, from people who are just tremendously upset that I dared to talk about Beethoven or Tchaikovsky or any of these people who were writing 'absolute music' and hauling into that music things like bodies and sexualities and desire and pleasure and violence: all those things which are, of course, completely central to the ways that that music operates.

**Susan McClary:** The turn to popular music was a very late development for me. I was raised by a father who was Cherokee, from an underclass, really an underprivileged background, but he managed to go to graduate school and became a microbiology professor. When I was born, he thought that he wanted me to be part of a higher stratum of culture, so he bought a record player, and he just played classical music at me in the crib, you know 24–7, classical music. There wasn't a time when I didn't know all of Beethoven, all of Mozart, all of everybody. So it's a very strange background. I was born in 1946 so Elvis appeared when I was 11, the Beatles appeared when I was a senior at high school. You know, those should have been my musics, they were certainly the musics of my peers. But I had my fingers in my ears. When I was practicing the piano I had a sense that, if I listened to popular music, everything my father had accomplished would collapse. He died in 1984. I was already a tenured professor, and I realised when I was asked to teach a course on 20th Century music, that I couldn't possibly say the history of 20th Century music is Stravinsky and Schoenberg and Boulez and so on. I realised that's just stupid, that's not what anybody listened to in the 20th Century. So I had to do a crash course for myself on all the music I ought to have known all the

way along. Starting with jazz and blues and then through rock. Fortunately I had a teaching assistant who was not only a classical musician but also an active jazz and rock musician, and that was Robert Walser (my husband since 1990). So he had my back; he could help me put things together, criticise arguments I made 'that didn't quite work'. But I taught him how to think conceptually about music, he taught me how to think about all of popular music, and together we pushed open a lot of doors. I was still trying to learn how to think about popular music when I wrote my article on Madonna (1990). Popular music was not in my background, and I was trying to figure out trying to take the kinds of tools I had and how to come to popular music which, belatedly, I had come to admire. It's always been difficult for me, given my background, but I have felt all the way along, since that moment, that I want classical music and popular music to be on the same methodological platform, that one is not better than the other, that we can deal with genders and sexualities in both of those realms. They construct those in radically different ways, of course, but the more I know about popular music, the more it informs the way I deal with classical music, which is what I mostly teach and write about

**Sam de Boise:** In what way? Can you explain that a bit more?

**Susan McClary:** Sure. Let me just say... the people who are called critical musicologists in the UK were called, were dubbed 'new musicologists' in the US, even though we didn't call ourselves that. But we all came of age in the 1960s where we saw the tremendous effect by which people playing three chords at most on their guitars were able to change the political world. At the same time we were off in our practice rooms, trying to figure out exactly what tone rows Boulez was using in *Le Marteau sans maître* – really consequential things like that. So the sense that popular music has these extraordinary consequences really hit hard for those of us in that generation. We thought: we think our music is powerful but what has it done for us lately? Not a lot. One of the principal tenets of new musicology is that the very things we deal with and see as consequential in popular music are also present in classical music if we just ask those questions. So asking questions about gender in madrigals, asking questions about power in the renaissance, asking about how Hildegard von Bingen is channeling a particular version of femininity and the sacred in her work: the questions are there and they are extremely productive. To find traces of these in Brahms is not to denigrate Brahms. It's actually to say 'maybe Brahms is just as powerful as the Beatles'. If we care about classical music – and I do – it really has to be dealt with in terms of the personal, the ways in which individuals are striving to construct themselves, their identities, given the kinds of options that are available.

Music has been a fundamental aspect of identity construction from before anything was written down. Seeing how that operates in popular music then allows you to go back into classical music and ask the right questions of music through its entire history and also music in non-Western contexts.

**Sam de Boise:** I think it's important that you point to how intimately ideas of absolute music are connected with people's identification with various music-related disciplines. One of the problems I've had when trying to teach your work and the work of other so-called new musicologists, is the kind of resistance you get, a lot of the time, especially toward the idea that music expresses gender or that gender plays a huge role in how music is constructed.

I guess this relates to one of the other questions I have which is, how much change have you seen in the way in which historical musicology, music theory and compositional practice are taught within institutions and higher education institutions because, from my perspective, it seems to be that you still hear

arguments around absolute music and music's transcendental qualities taught in both music theory and music history – the 'great man of history' narrative that comes up time and time again. So have you witnessed any shifts in the way in which music practice is taught using these theoretical models that you helped develop?

**Susan McClary:** I think there is progress. Not in the generation of music theorists who were there when musicology and music theory split apart. Those people felt strangled by musicology and so what they wanted to do is grab their marbles and do the most abstract things possible. So, we went through this whole period of pitch class sets and things that had nothing to do with anything – not even the way you hear. But the next generation, which didn't have that particular agenda, has realised that it's ridiculous to split analysis and theorising about music away from history. Some of the most interesting work being done today is by people like Alex Rehding, Suzie Clark, Larry Zbikowski. All of them are card-carrying music theorists but their work is virtually indistinguishable from what I do. They're dealing with how music itself produces constructions and how music is involved with identity productions. In fact, I think that music theory in lots of ways has come further than musicology has. Many musicologists are so traumatised by undergraduate theory training that they do anything they can to stay away from the music itself. So after we 'new musicologists' were arguing for bringing together analysis and history, musicology experienced a resurrection, and celebration, of the ineffable – and even ridicule of the music itself. I find that really unfortunate.

I have students who resist have to deal with the music itself. I see my job as a teacher to train people who are able to engage with music and with social concerns, with ideology. But, you know it's a long battle. We're going to have to keep working at that. I have a course called 'Analysis for Historians' where we deal with about 10 different genres ranging Beethoven's Eroica, just to make sure we know how to do chords and forms, all the way to Kaija Saariaho's most recent opera, to blues-based music, to film scores. And for each of those we always ask: what is the object of analysis – what is this thing, what do we need to know about it? Then what is our objective, why are we doing this anyway? I feel that this helps to free people from this fear of analysis that they had foisted on them as undergraduates, and it allows them to talk more freely about what's important about a piece of music. They're able to talk about colour, they're able to talk about temporality, they're able to talk about gender and sexuality and desire and pleasure and all of those things which are really fundamental to what we ought to be doing as analysis as music theorists anyway.

**Sam de Boise:** What are your overall impressions of the state of research on music and gender today? What do you get excited about and what are the key developments for you? Do you still think that there's a future for research on music and gender?

**Susan McClary:** Gender is with us for the long term – it's not going to go away. What's interesting about gender and about a whole range of sexualities is that they have changed over the course of the last 30 years. The kinds of representations that you see in the Grammy awards, you know, are really different from 30 years ago. 30 years ago, women composers did not want to identify themselves as women, and I got my greatest pushback on *Feminine Endings* from women composers who thought I was trying to put them back in a box where they were supposed to sound like ladies or something like that, But that was not the point. My favourite woman in that book is Diamanda Galas who is scarcely a lady. In part because of *Feminine Endings*, a lot of younger women who go into composition think 'yeah, I do want my music to have to do with the fact that I identify as a woman, I want to foreground that'. So you have Ashley Fure, Du

Yun, Caroline Shaw, Kate Soper: they all read *Feminine Endings*, they all had to read it when they were undergraduates, and they're kind of surprised I'm still alive when I meet them [laughs]; they grew up not even thinking this was a problem. The music they're writing is really powerful. It's exactly what I hoped would happen.

The composer who first came to my attention who was foregrounding gender in her music was Kaija Saariaho, who is arguably one of the three or four great composers alive today. She decided when she was about to have a child that there were all kinds of things she was experiencing with her body – the feeling of two heartbeats going, what it meant to be a mother, what these feelings and experiences were like – and she started writing those elements into her music. She developed a women-centric music vocabulary that is really quite extraordinary. She approached me and asked me to write program notes for one of her premieres, which was one of the most gratifying things that's ever happened to me in my career, that a woman of that stature would say: 'you understand me, you understand what I'm trying to do and I want you to write about me'. These younger women also: they just take this for granted.

I would say that what women are allowed to do in popular music also has shifted. You look at Beyoncé for instance – her performance last year in the Grammys where she was hugely pregnant with twins, where she didn't try to hide it away but made it a very important dimension of her performance as she was impersonating an African fertility goddess. Her film and album *Lemonade* take discussions of race and gender to a profoundly new space. So the conversations have changed, as we have found, as artists and scholars, that these are not taboo, that we can talk about them, that we must talk about them; the music has shifted, the things that artists are doing have shifted. The fact that Kendrick Lamar won the Pulitzer Prize this year – just unbelievable. Usually when the Pulitzer in literature comes out, I've already read all of the finalists – these are books that everybody reads; usually when the Pulitzer in music is announced even I go 'who?' So to have someone like Kendrick Lamar win that prize gives a kind of intellectual legitimacy to hip hop. I see the future in this area as extremely bright. We have so many artists, both in popular and classical music, who are pushing the envelope and are getting a lot of attention.

In the US we have, of course, been going through the trauma of our current presidency. One of the things that has triggered is #MeToo: if we cannot figure out how to get him out of office, we can at least start looking at sexual abuse and calling it by its name wherever we see it. In the last year we have seen all kinds of major figures in the arts, in politics, being pushed out because these violent behaviours are no longer being kept under wraps. Many of the women who came forward are women in popular music, of course – it took a great deal of courage given the studio system and the possibility of backlash, and yet they have been doing that by the dozens. That also involves putting your music and your politics together and using them to push the conversation in a very public way.

**Sam de Boise:** How do you see that relationship between the analysis of gender in musical texts and the kind of more, I guess, sociological approaches to sexual harassment, discrimination and abuse within the industries and within music cultures themselves? I feel that sometimes there is perhaps a tendency to emphasize the 'progressive', the 'revolutionary' and the 'radical' potential of music whilst at the same time these discriminatory processes are going on in the background. What's your view on the relationship of the analysis of musical texts and the structural and material conditions in which these texts are being created?

**Susan McClary:** Well to stay in classical music: Catherine Clément pointed out in the 1980, that the female characters in opera are required to die and violent deaths. This awareness has led a lot of young women

who are writing operas to think about different stories. Or in the case of Du Yun and her opera *Angel's Bone*, to foreground violence, domestic violence and even to see women as potentially the perpetrators of sexual violence, as is the case in that opera, or Missy Mazzoli's *Breaking the Waves*, which deals with very complicated sexual issues. For Catherine Clément and then #metoo too have raised the issue of representation in opera has made a lot of people write operas very very differently; they don't just think 'oh well, a woman has to die – the fat lady has to sing and then she dies'; we can tell other stories. Madonna was already playing with some of those figures in her music. In 'Live to Tell', she collapses on the stage, a violent death, and then resurrects herself. I think that a lot of what Beyoncé does, also, deals within the music with domestic violence and the possibility of moving forward. This has become very important in the ways that people are putting music together and the kinds of topics that they choose. They are at least aware of what violence sounds like in purely musical terms, and that is not to say that they shy away from it entirely. Some of the most violent passages that I know are in Kaija Saariaho's work, but she knows precisely why she's doing it. It's not just that desire leads up to this great boom and then we kill the girl. Where does violence occur, how do you manipulate the contrast between violence and serenity or pleasure? Does desire necessarily have to conclude in violence? Musicians are thinking about these issues very self-consciously now. And I think that makes our musical world very different from when you could do anything you wanted and you could say it was absolute music then, who was to say?

**Sam de Boise:** How far do you think the literature around feminist musicology or the literature around music and gender from authors based in Global Northern states have engaged sufficiently with perspectives from the Global South and what can be done to destabilise the assumption that knowledge produced in the Global North should be regarded as at 'the centre' we do as researchers in the Global North?

**Susan McClary:** Well just as Foucault taught us that gender and sexuality have histories, they also have geographies, and we have not dealt with that sufficiently. Many people in the US – and probably in the UK as well – don't know other languages. So we are boxed in to what we can perceive within an English-speaking context. I know that scholars in Brazil are extremely interested in pursuing these issues. They've translated part of *Feminine Endings*, so they are grappling with this. I was brought by the University of São Paulo down to a conference in 1994. So scholars there have been interested for a long time in how to open up these issues. We had a postdoctoral fellow here from Brazil a few years ago who was working with Bossa Nova. What was interesting is that we think of Brazilian music – Samba and Bossa Nova – as 'let's boogie down and have a good time', and we're completely oblivious to the class implications of the actual physicality of these dances, to the histories of these dances, to the ways they pan out in terms of racial tensions in Brazil. The same kind of thing can be said of Tango in Argentina or all of the musics that have come out of Cuba and have influenced jazz and influenced early rock n roll, influenced even Bizet and Carmen. We are aware of all these musics peripherally, yet we don't pay much attention to the people whose musics these are. And we need them in our conversations, because clearly we're not in a position to speak for them. I was reading in one of my student papers a quotation; 'we don't have to speak for others, we can just pass the mic'. And I think it's time to pass the mic, to allow those voices to be heard. African musics were – and are still – woefully understudied. If I play a sample of West African drumming, most of my students hear that music as just coming from party music, because that's where percussion entered into our imagination. But some of those pieces are for funerals. I had a student who was a master drummer who said 'I hear this music and I weep because I remember my grandmother's funeral and the

ways we danced and the ways we shared our feelings'. None of that is audible to us; we have no idea what the language is. We hear drums and we think 'time to boogie'.

The Southern Hemisphere has nurtured us but has been pushed over into a kind of 'primitivist' corner, that is very strongly influenced by colonialism; we read and we hear those musics in the terms that the colonists gave us and we need to hear those musics, need to hear those voices talking back. Rob [Walser] and I had residencies in South Africa about four years ago; they brought us in because of a kind of crisis. The government had said 'in all of your music courses (theory analysis, history, everything), you have to pay at least equal, if not more attention, to indigenous musics. 'Musicologists who had been trained in the UK were thinking 'oh my god, how do we do this?' But it was a government mandate, and they had to change. Something similar is going on in Canada with respect to indigenous musics; there are communities of musicians we ignore because of colonisation and our own genocide and the ways that the US government were responsible for marginalising and indeed massacring millions of people. So all of these voices will help to draw the larger musicological community out of those little shells that we happily lived in so long. It can only benefit all of us – just in the way that my finally listening to popular music allowed me to ask completely different questions of classical music. The more that we hear from the musicians of South America, Central America, Africa, South Asia, the more we will be able to recognise the enormous power that music has in human life and identity. It will also cause us to think in much more particular terms about what this music is that we took to be 'music', how really valuable that realisation is, and how vast the whole world of music is.

**Sam de Boise:** In your opinion how do we keep gender in focus when we're looking at geopolitics, questions of race and questions of ethnicity rather than separating them out? Given that they're so interlinked, how do we keep gender in the conversation when we're doing these kinds of analysis?

**Susan McClary:** Well, as I said, gender doesn't go away. The kinds of crises that we find in these other parts of the world are often centred on gender and sexuality: rape cultures, compulsory female circumcision, the AIDS crisis which has become so rampant in areas in which gender and sexuality are taboo for discussion – all of these things just circle right back to the centrality of gender and sexuality in our lives and that is at least as true, if not more so, in other areas. In many parts of the Middle East, women are not allowed to perform in public, speaking the centrality of gender in music: are women allowed to play instruments, are they allowed to perform onstage, are they allowed to sing, is it going to be destructive to hear women's voices (which it still is in many communities – or it's believed to be the case)? All you have to do is introduce the question 'do gender and sexual behaviour have anything to do with this music? Suddenly all the answers start tumbling out. Just as a lot of women in popular music have been using their platform as popular performers to address sexual harassment and abuse. You give people tools to use music to address those concerns and watch their ideas spread much more effectively than through any other medium. We have a graduate student, Jarryn Ha, who just finished a dissertation on K-Pop and constructions of gender, starting right after the Korean War and going up until the present. The ways in which women performers in Korean popular music have been allowed or encouraged to express themselves have changed enormously as connections with the US have changed, as technologies have changed, as sexual mores have changed. It's really fascinating project. Jarryn is himself Korean, so he has access to all of those documents, and he can speak as both an insider and an outsider. We need many more people like that, who are able to tease those things out and really get at how gender and sexuality are expressed, particularly in parts in the world that sometimes have something to do with the US but often do not.



**Sam de Boise:** I guess my final question, it's quite a big one, but what's left still to do for research on music and gender?

**Susan McClary:** Well, as we were just saying, we need to have many more of these voices, we have to have more people join the conversation. When I wrote *Feminine Endings* I had had two trans\* students – graduate students – one of whom you know: Jack Halberstam. I have since had four trans\* students who have worked with me. 30 years ago this was still considered a kind of 'freakish' phenomenon. We hadn't really begun to deal with the ways in which we were just gendered in binary terms. A huge amount of work is now being done on trans\* musicians, on what it means if you are a singer and you decide to transition – what do you have to do physically and psychologically in order to preserve your identity as a singer or as a musician as you are making that move? Even in music education, which tends to be a profoundly conservative discipline, we have serious discussions and even conferences on the trans\* community and how people, in dealing with music education in high schools and grade schools, ought to be engaged with those issues. I mean, can you imagine 40 years ago anybody thinking about those things, let alone having conferences with people who are grade-school and high-school teachers, who are learning how to deal with these very complex, gender-related concerns. That has really changed so much of the conversation over what constitutes gender.

As I just said, when I wrote *Feminine Endings*, I already had had two transgender students. But how to bring that in when I already knew no one wanted to talk about meaning in music at all? So I thought: 'can we just first say that, in opera, there are boys and girls and talk about how that is constructed?' I had to start somewhere, and I started there. To have divided it up into all these splinter groups would have made it difficult to arrive at the logics of musics of the 18th and 19th Centuries. But now we have to deal with genders and sexualities in a much more complex way, because those communities are voicing their positions and making us aware of all the gradations that are involved in all of these constructions. And again, music comes into this in such important ways – how did you learn what it meant to be cisgendered? By listening to pop music, right? What did you have to do to overcome that? How do you voice other possible modes of being? When I was trained as a musicologist in the late 1960s, early 1970s, none of these things could have been conceivable. People your age are now saying 'is there any future in talking about these things?' [laughs] You're in a position to make huge, huge differences, both by including this range of additional voices and creating a polyphony of people from other parts of the world, people who are constructing new concepts of gender. All of these things are now in circulation, nobody fights you if you talk about them anymore, you need to take that license and run with it.

## 2. Note about the authors

*Susan McClary* is Professor and Head of Musicology at Case Western Reserve University (Cleveland OH, USA). She is best known for her book *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (1991), which examines cultural constructions of gender, sexuality, and the body in various musical repertoires, ranging from early seventeenth-century opera to the songs of Madonna. A collection of her most influential essays was commissioned from Ashgate with the title *Reading Music: Selected Essays by Susan McClary* (2007). An edited collection, *Structures of Feeling in Seventeenth-Century Expressive Culture*, appeared in 2013.

*Sam de Boise* is a senior lecturer in Musicology at the School of Music, Theatre and Art (Örebro University, Sweden). His research explores gender equality strategies in music scenes and institutions, as well as relationships between gender inequalities and modes of listening.