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Exposing the gendered discourse of music education

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Women and girls are prominent and successful in music-educational settings, but are often in a small minority or even completely absent from many professional realms of music. How and why this reversal takes place is the main question addressed by this paper, which will argue that despite appearances, the school plays a major role in reproducing pre-existing musical gender divisions in the wider society, through reinforcing discursive constructions about gender, musical practices and music itself.¹

I conducted a questionnaire-survey in different parts of England, involving 78 secondary school music teachers who gave their views about boys' and girls' musical practices, abilities and inclinations. I also conducted two case studies involving tape-recorded interviews with 69 pupils (aged 11-16), in small, single-sex friendship groups in two mixed inner-London comprehensives. In both the questionnaires and interviews, I asked open questions with the aim of digging beneath responses to seek out teachers' and pupils' implicit assumptions, values and expectations. I had no intention of attributing particular psychological states to teachers and pupils; rather, I aimed to illustrate patterns in the ways in which teachers and pupils represented themselves discursively.

'Affirming femininity' in the school: girls and boys singing and playing

Sixty-four of the 78 teachers ticked a box indicating that girls were the 'most successful' at singing, and none ticked 'boys', the remaining 13 teachers indicating that girls and boys were 'equal', with one nil response. Furthermore, in their prose responses, teachers overwhelmingly characterised girls as willing vocalists who enjoy singing lessons and who volunteer in large numbers for extra-curricular choral and other singing activities, often to the total exclusion of boys. Pupils' views were in accordance: the majority of girls expressed at least a readiness to sing, and many said that singing was seen as a girls' activity, or in the

words of one eleven year-old, 'singing is girls' jobs'. Teachers also said that far more girls than boys play orchestral instruments, mainly the flute and violin, and keyboard instruments, all of which were associated with classical music. Again, pupils' responses were commensurate: 'Most girls like to play the violin and the cello'; 'They don't branch out much from classical music' (two boys).²

Not only was choice of instrument gendered, but, as has been found by other researchers (see the feminist literature in Note 1), teachers linked girls' attitudes with conventional notions of femininity, such as a desire to express their emotions or a preponderance towards delicacy. Girls were regarded as lacking confidence, being disinclined to 'show off', and as more cooperative, open-minded, mature, hard working and reliable than boys. Overall girls were seen to *conform* to the teacher's and school's values, expectations and standards of behaviour. The same perceptions were again echoed in interviews with pupils. Regarding emotional expressivity and delicacy, pupils said girls liked love songs, soft or slow music, which was sometimes associated with classical music.

-There are two girls in our class who play the cello I think it is.

-LG: Why do you think that is?

-'Cos they like slower music.

(A boy)

Some of the boys characterised girls as shy or embarrassed, and this was also more than once associated with classical music: 'Most of the boys I know like to express theirself, and the girls, like Kerry-Ann, they're too shy, but I say if they're too shy, they should learn classical music'.

Clearly there is a strong relationship between these comments and empirical reality, because it is partly empirical reality that the teachers and pupils were describing. But that is

not all, for teachers and pupils also operate with meanings and values surrounding their notions of femininity, linked to the musical practices and the music itself in which girls are seen to engage. Classical music, slow music, or music which is sung or played on keyboards and orchestral instruments in schools, denotes what I will refer to as an ‘affirmation of femininity’. Through this implication, girls are able to adopt certain musical practices and musical styles, like a mantle or a piece of clothing which helps them to affirm their gender. At the same time, their musical practices reproduce the historical legacy of music, in which women’s roles as singers, keyboardists, string and woodwind players, have for some time been common and accepted as conventionally ‘feminine’.³

‘Interrupting femininity’ in the school: girls, boys, technology and popular music

In general, girls avoid performance on highly technological or electronic instruments, especially those associated with popular music, most notably, drums and electric guitars. But boys are responding very differently to the recent entrance of popular music into English schools. Boys in every under-fifteens age group, without exception, chorused that either they already play the drums, or they would like to play the drums. Many complained that they were not given the chance. Just as girls' music was understood as ‘slow’; so popular music in which boys expressed interest, was characterised as ‘fast’ or ‘upbeat’: ‘Cos we like putting a beat into it’.

Whereas, as mentioned earlier, girls are understood to use music to express their feelings, boys are understood, by both teachers and pupils, to emphatically denunciate most musical activities as ‘cissy’ and ‘un-macho’, especially slow music and love songs, and to be keen on keeping up to the minute in their tastes. Otherwise: ‘People might think they're soppo’, and ‘They don't like showing their feelings’ (two girls). Many teachers and pupils

also said that boys were anti-conformist and over-confident in music lessons, refusing to take part and ‘mucking about’ with instruments, in ways that contrasted starkly with the characterisation of girls as shy and cooperative.

For a boy to engage in vocal or orchestral music, ‘slow’ music, or music that is associated with the classical style in school, involves taking a risk with his symbolic masculinity. If these activities provide a suitable mantle for girls, then they are for boys rather like putting on a dress. Just as girls negotiate a feminine gender identity through music, so boys negotiate a masculine gender identity; and they are often under a great deal of pressure to appear ‘macho’ (Lees 1986). In the context of the school, in so far as classical music denotes an affirmative, conformist femininity, so popular music ‘interrupts femininity’; and in this interruptive fissure a connotation of masculinity is able instead to assert itself. This interruption of femininity and the assertion of a masculine musical connotation again reproduce the historical legacy of women’s minority status or exclusion from a large number of musical activities.⁴

‘Threatening femininity’ in the school: girls and boys composing

The most striking thing about teachers’ responses was that, despite their characterisation of boys as uninterested, uncooperative and negative towards music lessons, they regarded boys as excelling at composition by virtue of being more imaginative, adventurous and creative. Contrastingly, they saw girls as dull and lacking in creative spark.

For example:

- ... on the whole, boys produce more imaginative work than girls.
- Boys are not so afraid to be inventive, and experiment. Girls tend to stick to set forms.

- ... Girls tend to be more traditional and conservative in their compositions
- ... girls seem to have to work harder and don't have as much natural ability.
- ... boys seem to have a greater creative spark than girls. ... The girls seem often to be devoid of ideas...

It is interesting to compare these responses with Walkerdine's (1990) analysis of gender in mathematics. Here, she shows, girls were *constructed* as failing, through being attributed with qualities such as perseverance, obedience and commitment to work, which were then used as *causal explanations* for their failure: as examples of lack of autonomy, creativity, initiative. When girls did succeed, this was attributed to rule-following and rote-learning, which were distinguished from and even opposed to understanding. But 'naughty' boys could 'break set', think independently, 'reason'. Thus even though their actual attainment may have been poor, they were seen to 'understand' properly.

When pupils talked about composition, they did not use the same terms as teachers - 'conformity' or 'creativity' - but they adopted similar characteristics through other means. Some of the girls expressed a strong dislike and a debilitating lack of confidence in composition, others viewed their compositions with pleasure and pride; but in both cases they operated within conventional conceptions of 'femininity'. For example they opposed themselves to theory, using composition as a way of expressing their feelings: 'Well I like composition, when it's doing what you feel and everything, but I don't so much like the theory because you've got to learn it...'; '...it's not come from a book, it's come from you, and actually you know it's yours, yourself'. Some of them characterised themselves as 'incompetent' or 'confused', all of them indicated a reliance on the teacher, and even those who liked composition were prone to denigrate at least some of their own work in numerous asides when they described it as 'silly', 'boring', 'horrible' and 'terrible'.

Boys displayed completely different attitudes. All but one were positive and carefree in their attitudes to composition, whether or not they saw themselves as 'good' at it. They demonstrated not merely a confidence in their ability and a lack of reliance on the teacher, but a rejection of the teacher's advice and values; they presented themselves as less hard-working, yet more 'clued up' about what they needed and what they were aiming for. Rather than having 'done their best' they all indicated that they 'could have done better'. None of them mentioned his feelings.

As with the 'affirmation' and 'interruption' of femininity in the realms of performance, here I would suggest that there is a symbolic 'threat' posed to femininity by virtue of the unquestioning assumption of two historical precedents. One of these is the empirically not unreasonable presupposition that any piece of music one hears is likely to have been composed by a man; the other is a more ideological association of the process of composition with cerebral prowess, and in turn, with masculinity.⁵ This threat is here being re-enacted in the musical practices and the common-sense attitudes of teachers, girls and boys.

Resistance and desire in the music classroom

Thus far, I have made it seem as though the reproductive mechanisms of the school work rather too smoothly: girls and boys appear to negotiate their musical practices in close accordance with pre-existing gendered connotations of particular musical practices, linked to musical styles, that mark the history of music. But the school does not reproduce wider societal relationships in any straightforward way. On one hand, resistance to musical gender-roles is sometimes offered to pupils by teachers, who themselves take up critical practices. On the other hand, although pupils do largely share the same assumptions as their teachers, they

also have alternative perspectives, and take part in different practices, of which teachers are often either disapproving, dismissive or unaware.

Regarding the affirmation of femininity, girls' interest in music at school is, as I have indicated, linked to a notion of their conformity to the teacher's values. But 'naughty' or disaffected girls are liable to find choirs, orchestral instruments and classical music less inviting. One musical practice that is available to such girls is singing popular music. Many schools nowadays include popular music in their curricula; but quite often, by virtue of that very inclusion, the music takes on the same conformist characteristics as its classical counterpart, and is not even perceived by pupils as 'popular music' at all. Therefore when girls resist the mores of the school and yet still take part in singing activities, they often do so outside the officially sanctioned limits of 'what counts' as music in the classroom: in youth groups, in the playground, at home. By taking this route, some girls may be sending overtly resistant signals to the school; but they are a long way from resisting the wider and more powerful definitions of femininity which have been handed down through the affirmative musical connotations of women's singing for hundreds if not thousands of years. When it comes to the more interruptive practice of playing instruments in popular music, even though a minority of girls and women do play drums and electric guitars, the overwhelming finding of my research was that in schools such girls are still perceived as very rare; but more significantly, that the associations carried by popular music instrumental performance practices are almost exclusively masculine. In the case of the symbolic threat of a female composer, teachers and pupils alike closely guarded the concept of the creative genius as a male-only preserve, and there was very little, if any evidence of a challenge to this conception.

Even though some girls may resist the authority of the teacher, in general girls do not

resist the symbolic aspects of femininity carried by different musical practices. Likewise boys who wrest their musical roles away from the surface values which they understand to be propagated by the school, are nonetheless conforming to wider conventions of masculinity. School-pupils use music as a shield which can hide, or a piece of clothing which can express something about their gender as well as their sexuality, amongst other social constructions. Most pupils harbour a deep conservatism in the musical realms of gender and sexuality, expressed because of a desire: a desire to *be* a 'girl', a desire to *be* a 'boy'. Music makes possible a non-verbal symbolic presentation of this desire, for musical activities are not simply something to do or not do: they contain deep personal significance.

It is a vital aspect of the symbolic power of music, that it enables girls and boys to *cross over*, just as it enables them to affirm, gender divides. Most particularly when pupils are regarded as exceptionally 'talented' do such cross-overs occur, resulting in a self-selection process on the part of boys, which corresponds with the dominance of males in the adult world of professional music. This is one explanation of the reversal in musical roles alluded to at the beginning of this article.

Conclusion

Schools help to reproduce girls' and women's, boys' and men's long-standing historical musical practices. This reproduction occurs precisely because schools offer an apparently equal opportunity to both girls and boys to take up any instruments, and to become involved in any musical style on offer. Girls and boys on the whole respectively tend to choose particular activities and styles that already symbolically affirm conventional discursive constructions of femininity or masculinity in the wider world outside the school. Their involvement in these areas within the school then acts to confirm and reproduce the apparent

‘truth’ of this symbolic affirmation. But the school’s reproduction of enduring historical patterns in gendered musical practices, does not arise only through the raw offering of opportunity. Rather, the school perpetuates subtle definitions of femininity and masculinity as connotations of different musical practices and musical styles, in which pupils invest their desires to conform, not necessarily to the school, but to the wider social construction of gender.

Endnotes

1. The arguments presented here derive from Green (1997), where they are considerably more fleshed out. The work is situated within the sociology of music education, drawing from literature in the sociology of education (see e.g. Bourdieu (1973), Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), Young (1980), Whitty (1985), Willis (1977); and feminist education studies (see e.g. Arnot and Weiner (1987), Measor and Sikes (1992), Stone (1994) Walkerdine (1990) and from a cultural studies perspective, McRobbie (1991)).
2. For further research on the linkage of particular instruments with particular genders, see e.g. Bruce and Kemp (1993), O'Neill (1997).
3. For further substantiation of this claim, see Green (1997) or the historical literature on women in music, e.g. Bowers and Tick (1986).
4. See the Note above. For example, within classical music, it is only in the last eighty years or so that women have been allowed to play in orchestras alongside men; and even then they have mainly been restricted to strings and woodwind. Some orchestras are still largely or even entirely male. Another example would be in jazz, which contained only a very small minority of women from its inception and is still male-dominated. See e.g. Dahl (1984). In popular music and rock, although journalists enjoy writing about the 'female rock revolution', any number-count will quickly show that women still mainly take up the traditional roles of singing and playing keyboards and stringed instruments. See e.g. Gaar (1993).
5. See Green (1997 pp. 84-8), Battersby (1989).

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