

# Colloquy

## Music and Sexuality

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### The Same, but Different: Sexuality and Musicology, Then and Now

JUDITH A. PERAINO

What if music IS sex?  
—Suzanne Cusick

*The same, but different.* I saw this phrase some years ago on a T-shirt that advertised a lesbian-owned bar in San Francisco named El Rio, known for its Sunday salsa tea dances (always featuring a live band). It is a nonsensical phrase

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exclusion, anger and resignation, hard work and fantasy projection, social structures and individual compensations. It allegorizes the “dominant ideology,” or “mainstream culture,” or the “dream factory,” and explores the perspective of someone approaching from the margins. Our marginal perspective on mainstream culture is worth exploring not because of any heroic, authentic, or unencumbered vision it may offer, but because it’s where we find ourselves.

## Pleasure’s Discontents

WILLIAM CHENG

At times, those of us who identify as musicologists may find ourselves facing similar kinds of responses when describing to non-musicologists (say, while on a plane) what exactly it is that we do.<sup>30</sup> Invoking the very name of our discipline can be enough to elicit courteous yet uncertain nods from new acquaintances. Such puzzled reactions, we might imagine, are aroused largely by the *ology*—the intellectualizing appendage that makes a big scholarly deal out of this common thing called music. For the general public, the everyday values of music arguably lie above all in its recreational, pleasurable, and material dimensions. It remains telling that no matter how we frame our work in terms of more familiar subjects and vocations—by introducing ourselves, for example, as historians, theorists, anthropologists, philosophers, or instructors of music—one of the first questions from our in-flight companion will almost always be about what instruments we play. Indeed, ordinary perceptions of music as *played* (as performed, leisurely, ludic, and sonically manifest) are likely to persist irrespective of the profound social import, fraught cultural contexts, and intriguing aesthetic (de)formations that much of our scholarship painstakingly demonstrates. And so by the time our plane touches down, perhaps we’ve done a good job explaining what musicology is, why it exists, and how it matters. Or perhaps we don’t quite succeed—and instead, our fellow traveler’s disinterest or skepticism brings our high-flown words down to earth, prompting us to reflect in turn on the relevance and impact of what it is we think we do. Exchanges of this sort may ultimately suggest that, according to popular conceptions of musical engagement, it is *musicologist*—not musician—that represents a marked, mystifying category.

Scientizing approaches in musicology historically arose (and endure to this day) out of concerns about the discipline’s marginalized status within academia.<sup>31</sup> Musical pleasure in particular seems to afford at once a privilege and a

30. In conceptualizing this essay, I benefited from conversations with Michaela Bronstein, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Thomas Grey, Kate Manne, Anthony Newcomb, Elaine Scarry, and Kate van Orden. I am also grateful to Suzanne Cusick, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, Sarah Hankins, Hannah Lewis, Judith Peraino, Alexander Rehding, Chris Schepici, Kay Kaufman Shelemay, and Gavin Williams for comments on early drafts.

31. See Karnes, *Music, Criticism, and the Challenge of History*, 10, 13–14, 39–42; Korsyn, *Decentering Music*, 64–66; and Cusick, “Gender, Musicology, and Feminism,” 472–73.

problem to musicologist-identified musicologists: the privilege comes with the luxury of studying and teaching something we love (and is beloved at large); the problem, by the same token, lies with this ostensible luxury. As in various other fields—literature, art, game studies, and so forth—certain pressures are liable to accompany research on topics that sound too patently appealing (see also Lloyd Whitesell’s colloquy contribution). There’s a fear of not being taken seriously, of being written off as an enthusiast spouting views compromised by emotional overinvolvement. Even in light of academia’s now-conventional wisdom that leisure need lack no valence, a lot of musicological work evinces implicit efforts to disavow understandings of music as (mere) pleasure, play, and entertainment.<sup>32</sup> Scholars of popular musics have traditionally withstood the brunt of accusations about frivolity and self-serving fandom, but musicologists in general have long had professional reasons to be wary of music’s pleasuring powers.

In this essay, I discuss some manners in which music’s reputed pleasures inform how we, as musicologists, negotiate our scholarly tasks and intellectual orientations. I propose that an ambivalence toward pleasure can go quite a ways in explaining the field’s initial resistance to feminist and queer musicology, with its unflinching queries into desires, erotics, and haptics. More broadly, I contemplate how this ambivalence continues to impact our profession’s social etiquette, topical vogues, and disciplinary identity. I close with brief thoughts on ways in which recent developments in online technology stand to shape musicology’s public role and image. At the heart of this think-piece is an investigation into how pleasure bears on professional as well as personal epistemologies—on ways of knowing music, musicology, and ourselves.

Writers nowadays, when reminiscing about the uncloseting of queer and feminist inquiries in musicology, often proclaim just how obvious notions of pleasure are (and have always been) in all matters musical. Yet it is, of course, precisely the obviousness of these notions that once contributed to the academic repression of their explicit articulation.<sup>33</sup> Speaking directly about music’s pleasures risks the same missteps as explaining a joke, talking too much during sex, or insisting on other acts of explicatory excess. Insofar as we hold these pleasures to be self-evident, rhetorical mediations may spoil the moods of experiences that seem perfectly capable of speaking for themselves. To this end, musicological forays into gender and sexuality rocked the boat not because they extended unthinkable claims *per se*, but rather because they aired out

32. On the problems that musical pleasure, leisure, and entertainment can pose to musicology’s bids for respectability, see McClary, *Desire and Pleasure in Seventeenth-Century Music*, 216; Taruskin, “Musical Mystique,” 340–41; Lowe, *Pleasure and Meaning in the Classical Symphony*, 99–100; Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens*, 11; and Biddle, “On the Radical in Musicology,” paras. 2–6, 13–14. Valorization of depth, complexity, and difficulty resonates with broader modern(ist) distrust of surfaces, the beautiful, and the easy (see, respectively, Fink, “Going Flat,” 104–5; Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 57–86; and Cheng, “Hearts for Sale,” 62–66).

33. See Maus, “Masculine Discourse,” 265–67.

what had been known all along—that music is sensual, sexual, social; that it comforts, disrupts, coerces.

Narrow appeals to aesthetic autonomy and formal analysis have constituted some of the most polemical correctives against the alleged narcissism, self-indulgence, and special pleading of feminist and queer musicologies.<sup>34</sup> Ironic here is how straight-up analytical enterprises are hardly less susceptible to allegations of hermeticism and hedonism. The more these endeavors aspire to systematic, anhedonic rigor, the more they look like exercises in sublimation—like distinctly playful, pleasurable attempts to refine music and domesticate its unruly effects.<sup>35</sup> One means of diagnosing musicology's discontents would be to take note of how our profession has played host to tensions between the problems of pleasure and the pleasures of problematization.<sup>36</sup> This diptych, at its core, speaks to ways in which elevated critical strategies—analysis, hermeneutics, semiotics, phenomenology, deconstruction, and so on—obliquely (and compensatorily) bring musicology within the pale of academic respectability. Like Odysseus steering around the Sirens' shores, scholarly approaches to music sometimes read and sound as if they're talking *around* pleasure, circumventing the snares of emotional candor and its possible implications of irrationality, emasculation, and deficit of control.

Turning from discursive to behavioral cues, one could think of how musicology audiences (at AMS meetings, for instance) tend to sit ever so still when listening to presenters' recordings of upbeat music (say, funk, hip-hop, or a classical waltz)—music which, were it not for the shackles of propriety, might get more bodies to move and groove. Call it respectful conduct, concertized etiquette, deep concentration, straight-laced decorum, gluteal inertia, habitus: whatever its basis, such collective immotion bestows the impression of deliberate, even effortful defiance of music's physical sway. While it would be presumptuous to designate any robust bodily movement as a natural or requisite response to specific musics, the typical stillness of paper attendees betrays, at least on the surface, a desire not to appear too desirous, too *into* the music. It's a little bit funny—for as strange and uncomfortable as it could be to see colleagues head-bopping and hip-wiggling during formal talks, surely an entire room of consensually immobile scholars doesn't make for a wholly comfortable sight. In public academic settings, the very sound of viscerally compelling music can therefore place us (almost literally) in a double bind, making it awkward to move around too much, yet awkward to look unmoved. Presentations featuring rousing music, as such, have incidental power to expose some

34. For broader perspectives on identity politics and "moi criticism," see Siebers, "Tender Organs," 41–43.

35. See Maus, "Disciplined Subject," 18–19; and Guck, "Woman's (Theoretical) Work," 37–38.

36. As Joseph N. Straus puts it: "Most music theories are in the business of constructing deformations and anomalies and abnormalities precisely so that they can be corrected. Music theory creates 'tonal problems' in order to solve them"; *Extraordinary Measures*, 105.

vital slippages in our profession—between contemplation and action, scholarship and leisure, and academic corpus and fleshly bodies.

Ambivalence toward music's pleasures has also no doubt influenced the topics that musicologists have historically deemed worthy or unworthy of serious academic pursuit. I think it's safe to assume that several of today's visible areas of research—musical theater, film music, and popular music of all persuasions—came out, as it were, only after being harbored awhile as private guilty pleasures. Even Euro-canonical subjects such as opera, ballet, and pockets of nineteenth-century music arrived rather late to the game (not least through a substantial migration of early-music specialists into the Romantic era), a delay likely stemming from these repertoires' reputed decadence. A desire to get beyond music's pleasure-centric connotations may further account for the recent surge of musicological studies on war, injury, terror, torture, authoritarianism, censorship, and manipulation. If rhapsodizing about musical pleasure paints too rosy a picture, then it follows that pointing up pain, violence, and music's darker deployments can make for politically engaged, morally responsible scholarship. This work, by deaccentuating the positive, has done much to explode music's ethics, ontologies, and epistemologies.<sup>37</sup> It will, in this regard, continue to intersect productively with the maturing field of sound studies—the name of which, fittingly, advises us to look beyond the musically beautiful, to get past the basically pleasurable, and to redirect our attention from aesthetically valorized sounds (read: music in traditional terms) onto unsung elements of everyday acoustic ecologies.

Exclusionary attitudes toward musicology appear to have abated considerably over the last few years. Rarely now do scholars make absolute claims about what subjects, repertoires, and social products do or do not essentially benefit legitimate musical inquiry. While we could attribute this open-mindedness to the vagaries of generational shifts, it probably also owes, in part, to the practical, methodological, and informational affordances of Internet communications and related technologies. Participatory online cultures these days have potential both to expand and to unsettle musicology's role in society. Abundant views about music circulate via blogs, video response threads, live tweets, and other forums. Fans, connoisseurs, trolls, and flame-war instigators obviously don't shy away from value judgments and comments about (dis)pleasure. With passionate, confessional language, many of these users openly declare what they find tasteful or not, what they Like or disdain. People, of course, have always had plenty to say about music and its pleasures; it just so happens that, in the digital age, these perspectives have become far more accessible than before, with an escalating visibility that brings musicology's relative austerity into ever sharper relief. Mass expressions of musical opinion nowadays serve not just as data points for musicologists to harvest and analyze. By virtue of their sheer plentitude, these diverse views also pose a

37. See Cusick, "Musicology, Torture, Repair," paras. 2–11.

reciprocal challenge to musicology as we know it, inviting us to reflect on how our scholarship—in terms of content, method, vocabulary, tone, purpose, and mode of dissemination—may or may not be keeping step with broader conversations and developments taking place.

None of this is to say that contemporary musicology must compromise its academic principles, forfeit institutional cohesion, or assimilate into Internet chatter. Given, however, the unprecedented prominence of discursive alternatives that this chatter embodies, there is, at the very least, a growing need to interrogate the tricky binaries (and third terms) that underlie our discipline: musicology and non-musicology, work and pleasure, art and entertainment, scholarship and fandom, professional and popular, self and other, private and public, intellectual and sensual, and serious and playful, to name just a few. In a time of accelerating informational exchange, it stands to reason that what others think we do could prove as illuminating as what we believe we actually do. At stake are questions about what our discipline can become, where its priorities should lie, and whom (else) all this may concern.

## **Musicality, Sexuality, and Power: A Practice Theory Approach**

MAUREEN MAHON

It is no surprise that the intersection of musicality and sexuality is at the heart of my exploration of the presence and influence of African American women in rock and roll. The genre, named with a euphemism for sex, celebrates physicality, sensuality, the bawdy, and the glories of a moving pelvis. From the content of specific songs to the onstage performances of artists to the responses of audiences, rock and roll is a medium through which individuals construct and circulate ideas about sexual behavior, sexual orientation, and sexual identity; these ideas are linked to and dependent on ideas about gender, race, and class. Musicality and sexuality shape the practices and beliefs of rock musicians, producers, and fans; they also influence the ways and whether people are able to participate in the form and the ways and whether that participation is recognized. Consequently, paying attention to musicality and sexuality also means paying attention to power. In the case of my efforts to document the music and careers of African American women, addressing questions about power is paramount: Who had creative and economic control? Which people and which prevailing assumptions dictated the form the music took? How did the race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and generation of an artist shape professional experiences and aesthetic choices?

My training as a cultural anthropologist leads me to emphasize the production of meaning as I consider these and related questions about musicality, sexuality, and power, and to do so using practice theory, a framework that is attentive to the dialectical relationship between structure and agency. Accordingly, I proceed in a way that recognizes the interdependence of mean-