Audible Traces: Gender, Identity, And Music By Elaine Barkin & Lydia Hamessley– A Book Review

Zurich: Carciofolo Verlagshaus, 1999, 358 PP. Accompanying CD. $58.05.

Patricia Empringham Warnock

This book, as described on its back cover, "aquaints and confronts creative readers" – and listeners, in its exploration of the ways in which we both identify with music and our music identifies us. Audible Traces does not purport to embrace any specific feminist theoretical orientation; in fact, Elaine Barkin writes that even the editors are "close to 180 apart in almost every way" (p.xiv). Rather, the book covers a wide range of approaches, some from specific personal experiences, some analyzing and de/constructing from larger societal and musical structures, and others offering a glimpse of gender from the perspective of the composer, the audience member, and the performer. The essays centre on the connections between gender and identity in music through genres, cultures, performance mediums, and eras. However, each author negotiates his/her ideas on gender and identity in music, and addresses the myriad perspectives possible in this continually broadening field.
As a relative neophyte to the world of feminism and music, having only being introduced to it this past year in a graduate music education program, I was somewhat apprehensive about approaching the book from a critical standpoint. Without an extensive background in the history of feminist theory in music, I read each chapter as an introduction to new thoughts, new directions, and a de/construction of my own largely unexamined connection with music from a gender perspective. Thankfully, the book’s lack of pretensions, lack of authority, and resistance to meta-narrative make it a refreshing and stimulating read, offering enough depth to challenge and learn, while not appearing impenetrable or elitist.

The book begins with a variety of responses written by female composers to the question "How do you go about doing whatever it is you consider to be your work?" (xvii). The range of answers to this very general question speaks to the editors’ strong desire for ‘unimpeded and free response’, and sets the character for the remainder of the book, where the authors clearly enjoy freedom in presentation, tone, and perspective. The wide-ranging and passionate responses in the first section also unmistakably reflect the editors’ philosophy of gender studies, a philosophy interested in gendered identities in their particularities, contradictions and challenges.

Certain chapters of the book require specific mention in this review, as they are integral to the impact of the whole. The book acknowledges the importance of plural meaning-making with the inclusion of Benjamin Boretz’s composition "music/consciousness/gender" in CD form. And, perhaps the approach of the book is best summarized by Boretz himself when he writes: "The idea – for purposes of ‘sharing’ - is to expose a diversity of materials, both ‘discursive’ and ‘expressive’, which may offer anyone present the opportunity to consider and encounter relevant experiences." In his composition, the layers of meaning accessible through speech inflections, music, and different voices necessitate repeated listenings and are able to reach the recipient in a much more intimate way than the written page alone. All possible written description falls short of his invitation to exploration. Boretz’s composition so clearly invades and wraps its recipient that some kind of connection is inevitable, and unavoidable, welcome or not. His journey to gender consciousness as music consciousness is echoed in so many of the rich descriptions of the other writers. And, as such, this last chapter is perhaps best suited to be experienced both before and after reading the other chapters, as a sensory bookend.

In her chapter "Lesbian skin and musical fascination", Martha Mockus draws on lesbian literature to focus on the concept of ‘skin’ as a symbol, a way of listening, and a marker of powerlessness in our society, as well as its connections to lesbian physicality and creativity. She does this by examining the Pauline Oliveros and Josa-Jones music/dance collaboration ‘Skin’ and by drawing from a wealth of lesbian writing. Mockus’ writing and the excerpts from other lesbian artists are rich, textural descriptions that combine race, culture, and class in their experiences of physicality and of the intimacy in sensory perception of the lesbian experience through music, theatre, and dance. Her ideas around sensory perception expand the concept of listener to the touched and the toucher, describing an intimate, shared experience between bodies.

Several of the chapters deal directly with the experience and performance of gender through examining the music of female composers. Marianne Kielian-Gilbert reads Rebecca Clarke’s Sonata for Viola and Piano to examine how subjectivity can be signified in relation to often contradictory female/feminine experiences. Kielian-Gilbert creates multiple meanings from the movement and explores the signifying practices of subjectivity by investigating her relationship with the composer and the work and negotiating various perspectives on listener/reader/performer. She roots her exploration in the writings of contemporary feminist writers on subjectivity and self-knowing. From the metaphorical ‘space’ of poet, performer, and daughter, Kielian-Gilbert begins to come to an understanding of Clarke through the music. What results is the realization of possibilities in the construction of identity and meaning, within the de/construction of a powerful contemporary musical work.

The ways in which we knowingly and unknowingly perform our gender and sex are examined by Suzanne G. Cusick in an essay that explores possible traces of gender in the music of seventeenth-century composer Francesca Caccini and draws comparisons to twentieth-century expressions of...
gender in pop music performance. In her effort to imagine an "embodied music criticism" (p. 25), Cusick struggles to address the limitations posed by our bodies on the performance of our sexing vocal music. Voices, of course, originate from within our bodies, and do not seem to be choices. However, using two performers from a more contemporary era, Eddie Vedder and the Indigo Girls, Cusick examines a cultural system she names ‘Song’, and participants’ acceptance/rejection of this discourse. She claims that individual performances can be extremely varied, and that these variations can subvert cultural norms. She begins to shape a background of questions for Caccini’s songs that ask about the cultural meanings of the body’s biological functions during singing, such as breathing and singing techniques.

One weakness in this examination might be her choice of contemporary comparisons. Although they are chosen for their relevance to contemporary popular music, she essentially examines the properties of their voices from an outsider frame of reference. Her conclusions are also based on the vocal quality and performance space of men and women’s vocal performance in popular music of two musical acts suggested by a university radio music director as the "quintessential" girl and guy group of 1994-1995. Her analysis is grounded in a Classical singing technique, and her research, especially on Vedder, is limited to the genre of his music, song text, and sound of his voice.

Later in the book, Renee Coulombe, on the other hand, examines the performativity of gender and sex of the Riot Grrl movement from within that tradition. The major difference between the two essays lies in Coulombe’s examination of the entire music, beginning with its place in "rip-tide" (p. 258) of second-wave feminism. Her writing powerfully delves into the ways in which two Riot Grrl artists "challenge perceptions of the relationships between sound and body, performer and audience, and perhaps most profoundly, music and sexuality" by using and manipulating their "knowledge of culture and society to shape the feminist message of their music" (p. 260). By looking at not only the music characteristics of Riot Grrl music but also the musical scene and its power dynamics, Coulombe manages to explore the expression of sexuality and gender from an insider perspective and not simply from a biological one.

The book does face certain challenges, however. For example, one difficulty in providing readers with such a wide range of essays, and therefore, topics and sources, might be that the background required to fully engage with some of the articles may not be sufficiently solid for many readers. For example, while Ellie Hisama goes into vivid detail about the music of Joan Armatrading, an undergraduate reader is likely to lack a broad enough background to be familiar both with this music and the Chinese music discussed by Su Zheng in her article. However the ideas that emerge in the articles are certainly accessible, and the descriptions provided by all of the authors sufficient to encourage listening. In fact it is this accessibility that enables readers to construct different levels of meaning, depending on their background knowledge or positioning. So, while in-depth reflection on specific musicological theories will not be an outcome for many undergraduate readers, it is a reference text that could be used both to stimulate the study of certain musics and texts in more detail, and also to offer different perspectives on materials already familiar. However, the meaning that could be gained from immediate access to the musical excerpts leaves the recipient to wonder why the music studied in the book was not included on the CD insert, other than for reasons of copyright entanglements. Clearly, a reader with direct access to all facets of this book’s explorations, including video footage of Chinese Opera and the disco sensations the Weather Girls, would be able to enrich her/his relationship with the text.

The chapters in Audible Traces are all rooted in a web of prior gender and feminist writing, discourse and possibilities. The general sense after reading the entire book is openness and confirmation, confusion and curiosity – this book is decidedly inclusive but also non-apologetic in the sense that contradictions are not resolved and meaning-making is left to the reader/recipient. As a source for courses in gender music studies, this book would be a valuable addition. It raises many different questions and offers ideas for further thought on topics such as performativity, formation and representation of gender and its intersections with race, class, and sexuality, and the analysis of different performance forms such as dance and opera. It is approachable and full of questions – the most telling characteristic of its plurality.
Overall, this book is perhaps most useful as a reference text to continually re-visit as the various essays intersect with our own and students’ scholarship: musicologically, philosophically, sociologically, and educationally. It is a fine collection of some brilliant writing and creation and certainly offers stimulation for further explanation.