Feminism.

In musicology, music theory and ethnomusicology, the commitment to the well-being of women and to the importance of their creative participation in culture and history has given rise to a body of scholarship dedicated to the understanding of women’s roles, experiences and contributions as well as the various ways in which gender as social construct has defined those roles in different cultural settings. Feminist scholarship has also been concerned with the retrieval of women’s compositions and the study of their activities as composers, performers and users of music (see Women in music), and with a critical approach in which the understanding of gender and gender ideology is brought to bear upon the entire musical realm. Specifically, feminist musical scholarship sees music as both product and promulgator of a gendered social order.

1. Development.

The earlier, or ‘women’s studies’, phase began to emerge in music scholarship in the 1970s as a branch of traditional musicology intended to broaden the discipline’s field of vision to include women. Its basic task was to locate forgotten women musicians in the European tradition, to make their works available in publication and recording, and to study their role in music history as currently understood. Such projects soon developed a critical edge, however, as researchers became aware of the ways in which these musicians’ experience challenged reigning music-historical paradigms of genre, periodization and performance venue and practice. Patterns of access to musical education and professional ‘separate spheres’ came into focus, through which existing gender roles and social values were inevitably imprinted upon the musical activities of women. Furthermore, insistent questions arose about the relationship between contemporary musical success and distinction and the grand tradition as transmitted to the late 20th century. These questions in turn led, as they had in other disciplines such as literature and art history, to the critical examination of canon formation, concepts of talent and genius, and ruling standards of aesthetic value.

This body of knowledge about women musicians has continued to grow and flourish, and its importance for the feminist goal of a fully representative music scholarship is immeasurable, but its relationship to what may be referred to as feminism proper varies with the degree to which each project makes use of interdisciplinary feminist theory and method. This second phase, using explicitly feminist intellectual tools, appeared in the late 1980s as interdisciplinary reading became common practice among scholars, and developed very rapidly with the help of the enormous body of precedent already available in other humanistic fields. It should not be thought that feminist scholarship took less interest in historical women musicians, but rather that accumulated knowledge about their experience and the parameters of their careers helped to launch a broader-based critique of the social formation of musical practice in general.

Thus feminist musical scholars wish to understand the impact of social context on music-making and, reciprocally, music's role in the process of cultural reproduction or the maintenance (and sometimes the disruption) of core values of its time and place of origin. Feminists argue that ideologies of gender and prevailing relationships between males and females constitute just such core values for most or all human societies. If so, the study of such ideologies and of associated musical practices will be mutually enlightening. This exploration has taken many forms, including the anthropology-influenced study of musical behaviour as well as the analytic or critical investigation of individual musical compositions.

2. Feminisms.
Although academic feminism is a notably diverse (and in many aspects internally contested) body of thought, feminist theory as it has been represented in music scholarship includes a number of common fundamental tenets. First, it holds that a useful analytic distinction can be made between sex (the biology of male and female) and gender (the social categories of masculine and feminine), the latter demonstrably variable among human communities and therefore socially pliable.

Secondly, feminism argues that in such cultural settings as the modern West where male experience is taken to be universal and normative, a scholarly commitment to the authority and authenticity of female experience can produce startling changes in long-familiar pictures. Otherwise, feminist scholarship argues, ethnographic accounts, historical narratives and critical interpretations alike are limited to only half the relevant data.

Thirdly, it contends that traditional academic and political distinctions between ‘public’ and ‘private’, because of women's historical – indeed, mythic – association with the protection and exclusivity of the private sphere, work against the full understanding of women's experience in the social world. The activist slogan ‘the personal is political’ means to underscore the conviction that the representation of personal achievement or lack thereof in terms of individual personalities and private lives obscures the systemic nature of the gendered framework within which all men and women must operate and from which power and authority derive.

It may be noted that these premises, which underlie feminist scholarship in all disciplines, have the tendency to blur or dissolve subdisciplinary distinctions among ethnomusicology, historical musicology and music theory. Feminist musical work has profited greatly from the resulting cross-fertilization.

All disciplines in which feminism has played a major role manifest a wide variety of schools of feminist thought, and indeed a variety of taxonomies for characterizing them. So-called liberal feminists, for example, formulate equality-based arguments generally in line with the dominant political liberalism of the USA and western Europe. Cultural feminists (sometimes called ‘radical’) typically make more separatist claims, stressing the importance of uniquely female needs, associations and cultural practices. Lesbian feminists argue that gender cannot be understood to any meaningful degree except in intersection with an analysis of sexuality and its cultural construction. Poststructuralist, psychoanalytic and Marxist feminists use arguments and analytic tools derived respectively from those bodies of thought. Nor are these categories mutually exclusive.

Most persistently debated are the opposed feminist positions that have been taken with regard to ‘the difference dilemma’, a primarily strategic disagreement about whether the similarities between the sexes, or their differences, should underlie feminist argument. Put differently: since the category ‘women’ has been so burdened with historical and cultural resonance, as well as unjust laws and unfavourable material conditions, there is intense and continuing discussion of the extent to which it can be recuperated either for the celebration of achievement or for the exploration of women's particular experience. An equally energetic argument asserts that the unitary category ‘women’ inappropriately obscures differences in race, class and other aspects of social identity which, like gender, distribute power and authority differently within different social contexts.

Within the world of musical scholarship such distinctions have not become very visible, although they may do so as musical feminist theory continues to elaborate. What have been more manifest are disagreements on certain specific issues; for instance, the relative importance of the recovery work of women's studies versus the feminist critique of the canon, or the viability of reading gender ideology – or resistance to it – in individual musical compositions. The interaction of feminist musicology with gay and lesbian (or queer) studies is in the early stages of development and cannot yet be usefully characterized, except to observe that it seems to be generating a theorizing of the body and of eroticism that is receiving support from other scholarship interested in performativity, especially opera studies, and from an upsurge of interest in the materiality of performance.

3. Postmodernism.

There is no doubt that academic feminism in its present form could not have taken shape without the advent of
Postmodernism, or that body of thought in many quarters elliptically referred to as ‘theory’. Along with poststructuralism and deconstruction, this cluster of new scholarly approaches now includes aspects of cultural and postcolonial studies and queer theory, although neither these nor feminism can be entirely identified with postmodernism as such.

All these modes of analysis have many interests and convictions in common. All are centrally concerned with social processes that generate meaning, with the role of differential power relationships in culture, and with modes of representation. They share the conviction that knowledge and interpretation are situated: that is, that social identity structures what is known, how that knowledge is used, and how representations are made and interpreted. Following from these concerns, criticism – understood as a situated act of interpretation – has become a primary mode of understanding within the humanistic disciplines, a trend that has had a particularly interesting effect upon musical scholarship because of that discipline’s relative unfamiliarity with the notion of multiple critical readings. At the same time, the conviction that experience differs with cultural situation has similarly profound implications for historiography.

Feminism also shares with postmodern scholarship an intense interest in culture (a term which, however, may be very variously construed) and the ways in which its ideologies may be reproduced or contested through representations such as texts or works of art. This exploration has been a highly visible activity in feminist musicology, for instance in the much debated question whether Classical sonata form encodes an interaction between dominant and subordinate themes that can be taken as a representation of gender interaction, or in studies of the musical representation of women, paradigmatically in opera. Such scholarship furthermore entails a challenge to the traditional understanding of ‘absolute music’ as being without representational force, an apparent claim of autonomy from the cultural surround which seems unlikely to feminists; it has also been noted, in any event, that the emergence of a music intended to be perceived as abstract and ‘absolute’ is in itself a phenomenon wholly saturated with cultural meaning.

Postmodern thought brings with it a tendency to cross boundaries which is akin to the feminist refusal of the divide between private and public. In this spirit, perhaps its most powerful contribution has been its radical interdisciplinarity, which has resulted in a synthetic and pandisciplinary body of critical theory. Certainly the foundational assumptions of feminist theory are not intrinsically more relevant to any one academic discipline than to any other, and feminist scholars in music as elsewhere have found them to have explanatory power over many phenomena already observed within the disciplinary purview. By now, indeed, feminist musicologists regard themselves as contributors to a common interpretative undertaking as much as beneficiaries of its earlier achievements.

Despite these commonalities, the degree to which postmodern methods and assumptions are valuable for feminist work is a source of disagreement among different schools of feminist thought, though most agree that its tools should be used with caution. Postmodernism is by definition politically equivocal because of its principled refusal to resolve contradictions; feminism insists upon an unequivocal ethical commitment, notwithstanding a quite variegated politics. Furthermore, postmodernism’s positing of an unstable and fragmented subjectivity seems to many to put into question the category ‘women’ in a way that would disable feminist work, and to make inaccessible the notions of authority and intention that are central to the historical interpretation of women’s productivity.

To put the matter another way, many feminist scholars argue that postmodern thought lacks the materialist values needed for social change in the real world, and that feminism's commitment to women, their achievements and their material conditions could only be vitiated through the postmodern deconstruction of subjectivity and agency. Feminist literary critics have observed, for instance, that the much vaunted ‘death of the author’ was proclaimed just at the moment that so many female authors were being rediscovered; it seems similarly provocative that the postmodern challenge to formalist musical analysis is arising just when feminists are beginning to explore the musical encoding of gender ideology and putative stylistic differences in women's music.

4. Intersections.
Although the public media are eager to proclaim ‘postfeminism’, the death of feminist scholarship does not actually appear imminent; it is surely changing, and will continue to do so as new currents of thought arise. At the moment, feminism is negotiating interactions with other closely related intellectual movements that will without doubt influence its future character.

One such is ‘gender studies’, an extension of feminist thought that proposes to apply its insights even-handedly to both male and female experience. Some feminists, recognizing the powerful role gender has already played as an analytic concept, welcome this development as a dissemination of the arguments of academic feminism into a wider arena. Others fear that it will prove reactionary in its tendency to blunt feminism's critical edge and to return actual historical women to relative invisibility.

The interactions of sex, gender and sexuality pose especially absorbing theoretical and aesthetic questions now, at least in part because of dominant culture's prevailing representational practice in which only two categories, ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, are recognized. Feminists and scholars of queer theory (and many are both) often work together in this arena where so many urgent concerns are held in common.

Feminist scholarship is also revising and rethinking its relationship to the study of race, ethnicity and social class. Having spent years constructing a theory of cultural production that illuminates the role of relations of power, feminism, in musicology as elsewhere, has come to recognize the existence of other systems working in concert with the gender system, and engaging in the critical interrogation of its own practices. Especially as both the scholarly and activist components of feminism gradually enlarge their global reach, music scholarship will increasingly deal with familiar issues of cultural relativism and of the relation of gender and sexuality to other forms of social hierarchy.

5. Activism.

In keeping with feminism's commitment to the well-being of women and to its motto that ‘the personal is political’, musical feminism also includes explicit activism in the various music professions. Many learned societies have established committees or caucuses with the mandate to monitor women's economic status and advancement within the profession. Performers and composers have established organizations for the purpose of promoting women's music, and issue journals and newsletters to foster communication about opportunities and successes. Special performing organizations have come into existence in order to create more opportunities for women composers. Feminist recording companies, reference books and catalogues of available published and recorded music by women, and annual music festivals in various locations celebrate women's music-making and help to disseminate information about it.

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