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## Gender Bias in Music Composition: An Analysis and Comparison of 19th Century and 21st Century Works for Clarinet and Piano

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## Gender Bias in Music Composition: An Analysis and Comparison of 19th Century and 21st Century Works for Clarinet and Piano

**Gender Bias in Music Composition:**  
**An Analysis and Comparison of 19<sup>th</sup> Century and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Works for Clarinet and Piano**  
**An Annotated Bibliography**

The purpose of this research paper will be to identify the presence of gender in compositional techniques of 19<sup>th</sup> century works written for clarinet and piano in comparison to works composed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Within each century, one work by a male composer and one by a female composer will be compared as to discover if either gender of composer writes with a gender influence. The 19<sup>th</sup> century works will feature Johannes Brahms' Sonata for Clarinet and Piano No. 2 in E Flat Major, Op. 120 written in 1894 compared to Alice Mary Smith's Clarinet Sonata in A Major written in 1870. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Libby Larsen's Licorice Stick for Clarinet and Piano from 2002 will be compared to Jim Stephenson's Sonata for Clarinet in Piano from 2015.

**Van Den Toorn, Pieter C. "Politics, Feminism, and Contemporary Music Theory." *The Journal of Musicology* 9, no. 3. (Summer 1991), 275-299.**

In response to Susan McClary's "Getting Down off the Beanstalk: The Presence of a Woman's Voice in Janika Vandervelde's *Genesis II*," Pieter Van Den Toorn challenges McClary's stance that Western art music has been developed to represent the prevailing members of society who produce it: white males. McClary claims that male sexually saturates Western art music from a compositional standpoint, she compares Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> symphony to "the phallus of the classical Greek column" due to its formal structure displaying characteristics of having "thrust" or that it is "balls-to-the-wall." McClary states herself that people haven't considered

Beethoven's music to be sexual, yet they commonly describe it with male sexuality synonyms. Van Den Toorn challenges McClary's stances by focusing on the absolutism of music. He elaborates on an extensive analysis of Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup>, using Schenkerian terms to support his claims, and relying on the bare bones of the music theory to justify that music is not influenced by sexuality. It's simply *just* music. A response like Van Den Toorn's would benefit a research paper about gender influence in music composition because it provides another perspective in the conversation. Van Den Toorn's response is not only in disagreement to McClary, but also from a male perspective, and would supplement the view that the music experience is completely subjective, depending on the life experiences and internal thoughts of the individual. Which would additionally tie into the findings from Desmond C. Sergeant and Evangelos Himonides in their article, "Gender and the Performance of Music."

**Graham-Jones, Ian. *Life and Music of Alice Mary Smith (1839-1884), a Woman Composer of the Victorian Era A Critical Assessment of Her Achievement*. New York: Edwin Mellen, 2010.**

What constitutes as "great" music? Pieter C. Van Den Toorn posed the same question in his article, "Politics, Feminism, and Contemporary Music Theory," and claimed the definition to be "sophisticated art music," "distinguished from 'primitive' or 'sensual' music." Ian Graham-Jones claims that it was Alice Mary Smith's music that provoked the question if women composers could create "great" music. Graham-Jones compiled primary source material from Smith's life such as family documents and letters puts them into conversation with her compositions to gain a deeper understanding and analysis of her works and their influence on music composition. Alice Mary Smith caused a controversy within her time, and she continues to hold a legacy that paved way for future female composers. Graham-Jones claims Alice Mary

Smith is “most probably the first British woman to have written-and performed- a symphony [and] Smith surely deserves a place in history.” This book will help gain insight into the life and history of Alice Mary Smith and provide a look into her society that she was attempting to break into with her compositions. To understand if Smith’s music was written from a gendered perspective, it would be helpful to understand her journey as well.

**Harris, Amanda. "The Spectacle of Woman as Creator: Representation of Women Composers in the French, German and English Feminist Press 1880-1930." *Women's History Review* 23, no. 1 (January 2014), 18-42.**

What responsibility does the press possess regarding equitable matters and legislation? Amanda Harris documents the history of the coverage of feminist movement within published composers in the French, German, and English press from 1880-1930. She claims that feminists themselves have a duty to promote equal opportunity for women, and the feminist press has largely ignored feminist composers, although the number of female composers began to rise for the first time within this time period due to the presence and advancement of global women’s suffrage movements. Harris states that because female composers were vastly underrepresented, the press therefore contributed to the gendered influence within music composition: “Feminists’ ignorance of composing women is indicative of the efficacy of accepted notions of the gendered nature of creative musical brilliance.” Recognition is essential for the advancement of women; otherwise only men will continue to prevail most of our text books and programs in concert halls. This article is fascinating in looking at what societal factors influence and perpetuate sexism. Perhaps it is due to our press that one might perceive a piece of music to sound “male” or “female.” In comparing clarinet works by 19<sup>th</sup> century male and female composers to works of 21<sup>st</sup> century male and female composers, considering how the press might influence the

perception of gender is worth considering. This can be connected to biographical works of female composers within this time frame such as Nancy B. Reich's *Clara Schumann the Artist and the Woman* or Ian Graham-Jones' *Life and Music of Alice Mary Smith (1839-1884), a Woman Composer of the Victorian Era A Critical Assessment of Her Achievement*. Although both composers died in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, it would be worth looking into how the press documented their works, if possible. The lack of press for these women's works would also prove the lack of support for female composers.

**Kellaris, James J. and Ronald C. Rice. "The Influence of Tempo, Loudness, and Gender of Listener on Response to Music." In *Psychology and Marketing* 10, no 1 (1993): 15-29.**

Is music composition catered according to gender? James J. Kellaris and Ronald C. Rice document their findings in a study which sought out to examine the differences in music preference between men and women. The authors provide a brief background in the research of the psychology of effects on music. Music in advertising and marketing is discussed, in addition to other observable effects music can create on listeners. Kellaris and Rice go on to explain their study has an objective which focuses on two elements of music and their effect on gender. "This study extends previous research by exploring the influence of two objective stimulus properties of music (tempo and loudness) and gender on two types of hedonic responses to music: listener's judgements of the music's emotional character and behavioral intentions toward the music." Participants in the study were given listening examples which were digitally altered which varied in tempo and loudness. The results of this study show that the impacts of loudness and tempo differed by gender of the listener. "Females reacted adversely to louder music, whereas men did not." Additionally, this study did not yield results regarded a gendered difference to a preference of tempo. Kellaris and Rice conclude with reasoning behind these results attributed to societal

factors that influence notions of femininity and masculinity as well as differences in brain physiology. Understanding if there are tendencies of musical taste according to gender may influence the way composers write music, and therefore will help benefit a research study on gender bias in music composition. While this study investigates perception of music and gender, it is different than the study examined in Desmond C Sergeant and Evangelos Himonides' "Gender and the Performance of Music" because Kellaris and Rice are studying if trends exist in the preferences of music between two genders, as opposed to if music is composed from a gendered lens. The studies are similar because they both examine how listeners interpret a musical performance, however Kellaris and Rice focus on the subjective tastes and preferences of the listener, and Sergeant and Himonides study the interpretation of male or female according to the listener, almost opposite studies.

**Kelly, Jennifer. *In Her Own Words: Conversations with Composers in the United States*.**

**Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2013.**

A conductor, performer, and teacher, Jennifer Kelly sought out representation in academic music literature. She claims in her introduction, "I am keenly interested in exploring musical intention, with the goal of bringing a more informed performance to an audience." To complete this goal, Kelly has interviewed twenty-five modern day female American composers to provide insight in the world in which these composers are creating within: cultural and social experiences, educational backgrounds, as well as the effect of gender norms on their careers. Kelly designed her questions with the perspective of an educator in mind as she gathered general information about the composer's experiences to achieve an authentic representation of the role of female composers have within the entire field of music composition. Libby Larson is one of the interviewees, and her contribution to her perspective on being a female composer would

directly support a research paper analyzing one of Larson's compositions, *Licorice Stick*. Kelly credits Larson as contributing generously to the female presence in the art of music. She writes, "In her own experience, the lack of female role models in music while she was growing up encouraged her to seek out various other women artists, resulting in her numerous settings of women poets." Like Clara Schumann's biography, it will be helpful to investigate the lives of female composers to understand their perspective on what it means to be a female composer and how female gender norms might appear within a female composer's music.

**McClary, Susan. "Getting Down off the Beanstalk: The Presence of a Woman's Voice in Janika Vandervelde's *Genesis II*," In *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*. 112-131. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1991.**

Do women composers write differently than men? While some perceive her works as radical and controversial, McClary published profound essays about feminism and music for her time. In her essay "Getting Down off the Beanstalk: The Presence of a Woman's Voice in Janika Vandervelde's *Genesis II*," McClary discusses the elements of gender influence in Western art music, with emphasis on Ludwig van Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony. She compares the 9<sup>th</sup> symphony with Janika Vandervelde's *Genesis II* and analyzes the factors that differentiate male and female perspective in music composition. McClary's argument that male sexuality has dominated the Western art music field since the Romantic era. Male composers have then incorporated male sexuality through compositional strategies such as tonality, delaying the resolution of cadences, and therefore leaving the audience yearning for such release. McClary compares a work that exemplifies such "phallic" characteristics with modern-day female composers such as Vandervelde, who is challenging the standard with contributing compositions written from a lens of female sexuality. This article will be the cornerstone of this research paper, as



it influenced the hypothesis directly. McClary's proclamation that music is written in not only under a gendered influence but dominated by male sexuality is a question worth investigating. McClary has paved the way for researchers to investigate this issue in music, which may have led Desmond C. Sergeant and Evangelos Himonides to perform a study and gather data on gender influence in music, found in their article, "Gender and the Performance of Music."

**Pederson, Sanna. "Defining the Term 'Absolute Music' Historically." In *Music & Letters*, 90 no. 2 (May 2009), 240-262.**

The term of absolute music is analyzed and researched throughout history in this article, and Sanna Pederson makes it clear that it was not her intention to argue the definition of the term, as the definition is constantly changing throughout history. She challenges Carl Dahlhaus's claim in his *The Idea of Absolute Music*, that a history of absolute music actually does not exist, but rather focuses on the ideology behind the term. Pederson seeks to "trace the history of the term in order to answer what it has *meant* in all its diversity." In order to discover if there is a gendered meaning in 19<sup>th</sup> century clarinet music compared to modern clarinet music, it would be helpful to research the way people have viewed meanings of music throughout time. Whether musicians viewed music to have no meaning, such as absolute music, or to represent a higher meaning, such as programmatic music, do both styles of writing still depict a gendered perspective in their composition? Such research can be further examined in studies held from Desmond C. Sergeant and Evangelos Himonides, who sought out to discover if audiences perceive a gender bias in blind recordings but discovered that much of the gender influence is subjective and depends on the interpretation of the composer, performer, and listener.

**Rice, Albert R. *The Clarinet in the Classical Period*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.**

In an extremely thorough and organized book, Albert Rice documents the history and evolution of the clarinet in the classical era. Rice compiles an immense amount of information by topic, and each topic is further discussed by country, year, and contributing individuals. The classical era was pivotal for the standardization of the clarinet, and subsequently, its popularity among composers began to grow, and more audiences began to have more access to the instrument. Although this book is written about the clarinet in the classical era, it will still benefit a research paper comparing 19<sup>th</sup> century clarinet works to 21<sup>st</sup> century works. It is helpful to know the foundation and history of where the clarinet came from. Knowing Rice's approach to arguing for the influence during the standardization period of the clarinet can also be applied to future eras for the clarinet. The manufacturing of the instrument influenced the composition, it is important to understand that composers wrote for the instrument for the way in which it was built. Knowing this about the clarinet and its compositions is important in further investigations into clarinet literature to have a foundation on how it was originally written for, and how composers continue to work with elements that are idiomatic to the instrument, or in ways that challenge the instrument. Knowing what the instrument is capable of will help distinguish gendered approaches to composing for the instrument. For example, if composers know it is idiomatic for a clarinet player to play fast, scalar figures, this might evoke a gendered image in the composer's mind. Such evidence was supported in the findings from Desmond C. Sergeant, and Evangelos Himonides' "Gender and the Performance of Music," who claim to have found in their study that their participants viewed faster tempi to be associated with a male sound.

**Rodgers, Stephen. "Fanny Hensel, 'Von dir, mein Leib, ich scheiden muss' (1841) and 'manchman singen' (1846)." In *Analytical Essays on Music by Women Composers:***

***Secular & Sacred Music to 1900, Vol.1.* Edited by Laurel Parsons and Brenda Ravenscroft, 151-175. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.**

This collection of essays focusses on female composers written up to 1900. Each chapter highlights a specific work by a composer. The author will open their chapter with a brief biography of the composer, then dive into an extensive analysis of the composer's work, tying in musicological influences such as "music history, gender, culture, of hermeneutics." In this chapter, Stephen Rodgers argues common misconceptions and stereotypes attributed to Fanny Hensel's songs. According to Rodgers, Hensel's music is commonly known to be "spontaneous, unpredictable, and guided by 'fantasy,'" but seeks to prove that the feelings influenced by her music were intentionally created by her compositional techniques to evoke "the illusion of fantasy." Rodgers goes as far to say that if looked at more closely, there are deeper meanings within Hensel's songs besides 'fantasy,' such as, "freedom, oddity, unpredictability, spontaneity, unconventionality, and so on." He claims that the theme of 'fantasy' is commonly associated with women composers and all music seen as 'feminine,' such as music that is "characterized as discursive, fluid, and resistant to the highly structured." Does this align with Susan McClary's "Getting Down off the Beanstalk: The Presence of a Woman's Voice in Janika Vandervelde's *Genesis II*," who claimed that Western art music is dominated by tropes of male sexuality due to formal and tonal techniques? This question was answered in Sergeant and Himonides' study, "Gender and the Performance of Music," who found that listeners associated slower tempi with a female sound, and faster tempi with a male sound. This will be helpful in supporting research that music is categorized by gender by listeners, and society may be influencing our characterizations.

**Sergeant, Desmond C, and Evangelos Himonides. “Gender and the Performance of Music”  
in *Frontiers in Psychology* 5 (2014): DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00276.**

Sergeant and Himonides explain in this article their findings in a study inquiring if a gender influence exists in music. Their focus pertained to the perception of a gender bias within the three perspectives in which music can be experienced: from the lens of the composer, performer, and the listener. The data was collected by listening to two sets of 35 excerpts of published classical music compositions. Both sequences would be examples of the same published work, but one would be performed by a male performer, and the other by a female performer. According to the authors, there would not be a way to compare an equal number of female composers to male composers, so they chose to compare female and male performers of the same work to test if gender influences the performer’s interpretation. This study generated complete results from 69 listeners participating in the study who were asked to guess if the performer of the work was male or female. This study was then examined once more by a separate group of listeners who had not participated in the first study. These participants were asked to rate the emotional characteristics of the music such as “the temporal density, emotional valence, and mood of each extract” according to gender. Overall, the results of the study proved that the group of listeners were unable to differentiate the gender of the performers in the listening excerpts, and ratings of the three music characteristics showed that tempi influenced a perception of gender: slower tempi were associated with the female sex and faster tempi were associated with the male sex. These interesting findings would be helpful in analyzing the influence of gender in music and would benefit a hypothesis that such a gender bias is subjective, like all music experiences must be, yet the theoretical make up of a composition can indeed be perceived as male or female. Therefore, this would both support that the experience of music is

subjective depending on the person experiencing the music, however, the constructs within music do tend to be categorized by gender.

**Reich, Nancy B. *Clara Schumann the Artist and the Woman*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1985.**

In her biography of Clara Schumann, Nancy B. Reich sought out to annotate the life of the composer through primary sources such as diaries, letters, family papers, and concert programs. These primary sources give light into Clara Schumann's personal character and challenge common misconceptions about her life. Reich focuses on the daily life of the influential composer who shared many other roles within her life. To be a female composer in Clara Schumann's era also meant to juggle duties of motherhood, being a wife, as well as her professional occupations as composer, editor, and teacher. This resource would provide insight into the separate influences a female composer had in the 19<sup>th</sup> century than a male composer might have been faced with. Using Clara Schumann's biography to gain insight into how the daily lives of women strictly adhered to gender norms of the time period, which directly affected compositional choices. Understanding Schumann's daily life, relationships, and contemporary colleagues will not only give understanding into her influences into her compositions, but also show how these gender norms influenced male composers of the time.

**Wood, Wendy, and Alice Eagly. "Two Traditions of Research on Gender Identity." In *Sex Roles* 73, no. 11 (2015): 461-473.**

Gender identity is growing to become a complex field of study with multiple factors of influence within human psychology. To understand how society categorizes and rates gender roles, one must first develop a method for researching gender. Wendy Wood and Alice Eagly

highlight two research techniques to investigate gender influences within culture: the classic personality approach and the gender self-categorization approach. They state, “The classic personality approach to gender identity differentiates communal from agentic traits and interests. The gender self-categorization approach comprises identification with the social category of women or men.” Each approach will produce unique results, and Wood and Eagly claim that researchers can choose between either option depending on their topic of research, but both modes of research promote discovery of how gender roles affect male and female identity. In addition, to study gender, one should not limit their study to the binary of male and female but consider gender identity to be complex. Gender identities also “intersect with other social categories, including race and social class, to yield multifaceted self-definitions.” Wood and Eagly organize their research of gender identity into categories based on “feminine and masculine attributes,” “gender-stereotypical personality traits,” “sex-differentiated interests,” and “self-categorization.” Understanding how researchers document how society rates gender is essential in producing a research paper on gender identity. This will be extremely helpful in identifying types of studies one might come across in research to help understand the question the researcher is attempting to answer. For example, in Desmond C. Sergeant and Evangelos Himonides in “Gender and the Performance of Music” conducted several studies, analyzing how a group of subjects perceived a piece of music to be either male or female. These studies both show self-categorization, opinions formed from the internal psychology of the self, in addition to social constructs which tell a person how to categorize gender.