

MUSICAL AGENDERS

Music places us in sound, play on

You can tell which music is by a woman, she said. You can tell by the ellipses and circles, you can see all the symptoms. But they blindfolded her and played her music by a man, and then music by a woman. She made the wrong diagnosis. She thought the rectangles were by a woman. That doesn't mean anything she retorted. That is quite a different ailment.

in the performance
 she silenced a gun and looked down the muzzle
 flexed her legs and shook out her ovaries
 pulled a cloth over one face and smiled with another
 tied on a moustache

She was disposing of all the Beethoven piano sonatas. Each page was ripped into jagged snippets. She did not throw them out but stored them in a black plastic bag. Destroying them was a sad process because they delighted her. Then one day, without apparent reason, she put her hand into the plastic bag, drew out several severed limbs, and placed them in a tentative sequence. Notes (sometimes upside down) came together where they had been driven apart, pauses broke out from blank margins. And she played smoothly across the cracks, taking a blurred ride into new spaces, pursuing the unmapped.

I searched every library for books in which twentieth century women composers were seriously considered. There were hardly any. Even where women were discussed it was usually in relation to the male chord standard. Rarely, if ever, did the authors consider that women's music might need to be understood as part of a different sphere. And men were usually feted as innovators, while women were tolerated as conscientious mimics.

The music that she makes is formed of flesh
which sings, but in a language no-one speaks
as yet, and in a voice that only
takes the stage cross-dressed

she likes her home but needs to find
a place made out of other sounds
and so she travels
but by jumping trains
by cart without the horse
by scrambling maps

the music that she makes is forged from flesh
which spits and sighs but in a language
no man speaks and in a voice that
makes the listener stand up and undress

Improvisation swirls skirts; composition sports trousers. Improvisation is soft-bodied and composition is slightly aggressive. But both like each other's dress sense: both stare each other in the eye.

I looked in the glass and you didn't look back, the surface was blank and breathy. But when you spoke I saw the contours of my voice, its spirals and clusters. And this was how I knew myself. I could sound you out in my own sonic mirror.

He heard a low sound of women wailing, repeated weeping that would not stop. It was the lament of a thousand years, the expression of abject misery. But the wailing had its own texture and emergent rhythm: the longer it continued the more he experienced it divorced from its source. It stopped being women's grief and became a sound-wash swamping his senses.

Lubavitchers believe that a woman's voice can lead to promiscuity, which they regard as sinful. Men may only listen to the singing of women to whom they are married, or to their daughters. But men may sing as much as they like.

You can play well but we cannot give you a position in the first violins because you have a small sound.

So small, you mean, that I drown everyone else out.

You had read (somewhere) that Kristeva sees the semiotic in writing as a close cousin of the musical. Sound is a way of leaning on the door of the symbolic and letting it gradually fall off its hinges. But, the lecturer said, you may have to break down the door, because music is itself locked into the system.

a female voice pitched low to change its guise
 a note that switches sex to speak its name
 a woman rubbing salt into the keyboard
 sonic wounds that heal as women's work

This profession means continually being dressed down. Something is always wrong. Rehearsing is about finding mistakes, about where you're not meeting standards. This can be hurtful, though it might be viewed as a way of ascertaining the truth about yourself from others within a controlled environment.

Poised over the keys, she realised what was expected of her: virtuosity. Not musicality, but athleticism. Not sensitivity, but sportsmanship. The audience was clapping with unmovable expectations: she had to reproduce the classical tradition.

Music should not silence sound, play on