

Book Reviews

Marcia J. Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. \$37.50, pp. 307, notes, bibliography, index.

'Why is music composed by women so marginal to the standard "classical" repertoire?' This question provides the central focus of Marcia Citron's book, which examines the positive practices and attitudes that have enshrined the 'canon' of performed musical works. Citron exposes the complex of assumptions which underlie the establishment of the canon and in the process demonstrates that the obverse of the canon can be interpreted as an extended process of exclusion.

Canonicity in musicology has been gathering steam from the early 1980s. Initially the discussion addressed the discipline at large, although it was not long before content areas were given consideration. In 1988, at the annual conference of the American Musicological Society, the examination was extended to gender issues with Citron's presentation 'Gender, professionalism and the musical canon', which was later (1990) to be published as an article.¹ Canonicity had become a central disciplinary concern with the potential to clear a space for alternative historiographic models.

Chapter 1, 'Canonic issues', serves as an introduction to properties of canons, initially in the abstract, as conceptualisations of paradigmatic repertoires and then, in material terms, as assemblages of scores and other physical embodiments of music. Chapter 2, 'Creativity', is heavily laced with feminist rhetoric, though it is hard to see how else it might have been written since it explores themes of the restrictive traditions concerning women's ability to create and attempts to reframe them in feminist terms. It focuses particularly on the societal link between creation and procreation centring on the female body.

Creation, which involves the mind, is reserved for male activity; procreation, which involves giving birth, is applied to women. Labor refers to men's production, to women's reproduction. Conceiving for males is mental and takes place in the head; conceiving for females is physical and occurs in the womb. (p. 45)

'Professionalism', the focus of chapter 3, is an assumed characteristic of composers and has a lot to do with the chances for inclusion in the canon. It is a compelling issue for women composers, many of whom have been devalued because they were not considered professionals. Chapter 4, 'Music as gendered discourse', discusses the idea that music embodies gendered codes that participate in the narrative and communicative properties of music. It also proposes that music itself provides the basis for gendered discourse about music. The chapter focuses on gendered readings of sonata form in the nineteenth century and their implications for actual music. Citron's analysis of Cécile Chaminade's *Sonata* for piano (pub. 1895) presents a framework of alternative possibilities. In general, the chapter suggests that an understanding of canonicity requires a recognition that gender is inscribed in music. Chapter 5, 'Reception', discusses the social and historic implications of the processes entailed in how music is received and theorises that canon formation is a kind of super-reception. Chapter 6, 'The canon in practice', concerns the present and the university music-history teaching canon. The central issue and the culmination of the book is a critique of many of the historiographic paradigms upon which the canon is based. With this as preparatory material Citron investigates means of expanding the current canon to include women's music.

It is perhaps unfortunate that the developmental history of the book—from presentation to article to fully expanded text—is public information, for it proved impossible for me to read the book without constant mental reference to the article. Though the book is much more sophisticated in its style of language and development of argument, it seems to luxuriate in dealing with worthy digressions, the sort of attractive digressions which one puts firmly to the side in the clearly focused medium of the scholarly article.

Another characteristic of the book, but not the article, is that Citron makes an earnest attempt to involve a postmodern style and to develop her argument using a circular model or grid of inter-

sections, avoiding, wherever possible, a hierarchical approach. I am not being critical here, because I admire the attempt, but I would have appreciated prior knowledge of this, for I was about fifty pages in, and in considerable intellectual pain, before I realised what was going on. It is with a certain amount of embarrassed self-awareness that Citron admits that the ordering of her central chapters seems to suggest a linearity in canon formation which, though a traditional sequence, is accepted, for it 'creates an obvious organisational logic for the reader' (p. 8). Such coyness and an over-generous sprinkling of 'arguably' when it clearly was not, I found annoying, though other readers may not.

The most useful proposal for me was the consideration that women's music needs to be both mainstreamed and separated. It needs to be included in the mainstream canon on an equal footing with accepted works, in order to speak with those works of the mainstream tradition which gave rise to them all. But women's music also needs to be seen as belonging to a tradition of its own, one with shared values and repeated themes which speak more particularly of shared experiences, different from those of the mainstream. Another issue which is valuable for all of us who work within the canon and propagate it to those we teach is to be aware of the practices, processes and attitudes which underlie the canon, and while we may not be able to eliminate canons or the preference-making behind them we can 'teach the canon/conflict' and provide a practical means of grappling with the issues.

This is a very valuable book and should be required reading for any teacher or student of music/ology. It generally avoids feminist rhetoric (with the exception noted above) and is engagingly written in a stimulating style, such that it is hard to

read passively. Citron maintains a moderate stance throughout and steers a middle course between the Scylla of 'do nothing—one day they will notice how good we are' and the Charybdis of 'seek and destroy all canons', proposing that we work with what we have and by expanding the canon and educating the receivers of the canon we will all have a room of our own.

Canonicity is an *ad hoc* concept, an analytical construction. Like similar constructions it can help us organise the past. It is a way of imposing our desires on the past. Hence it is our collective and individual desires that need modification: what we wish the past to be, how we want it to be related to the present, and how we shape the future. In discussing canonicity we are talking about the direction and future of the field of musicology; about methodologies, paradigms, education, and above all, openness to change. We are also talking about ideologies encoded in music and the performance of music. May the conversation continue. (p. 232).

So the next time someone asks you why there are no great women composers you can 1) ask them why they have asked the question in a negative frame, or 2) answer that there *are* great women composers and list a few, or 3) suggest they read this book. I think the third option will provide the most persuasive answer.

NOTES

¹ Marcia Citron, 'Gender, Professionalism and the Musical Canon', *Journal of Musicology* 8 (1990), pp. 102-117.

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