

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327427719>

# The Gendering of Music: Breaking the Cycle

Article · January 2018

---

CITATIONS

0

READS

460

1 author:



Laura Curtis

The University of Western Ontario

5 PUBLICATIONS 1 CITATION

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



The Effects of Infertility on Female Singer Identity [View project](#)

### Abstract

The gendering of music places constraints on musical participation and perception that create a vicious cycle within the field of music education. It is imperative that music educators use critical reflection within the music classroom to deconstruct their own and their students' gendered musical perceptions, and to guide musical decisions which enable students to break the current gender cycle in music. This paper will discuss the ways in which socially-constructed gender norms play a role in children's musical perceptions and choices, and some potential courses of action that may be taken by music educators to deconstruct these gender norms.

*The Gendering of Music*

Whether based on instrument choice, participation in singing, musical listening preferences, or musical career choices, the gendering of music is a socially constructed phenomenon (Lamb, 1994; Green, 1997). As is the case with many distinguishing human characteristics, gender plays an important role in the formation of identity. In recent times, gender (not to be confused with biological sex) has been recognized as a socially constructed characteristic that can change or be changed fluidly (Bryan, 2014). As stated by Gould (1994), defining characteristics such as age, race, class, and gender interact in a way that does not determine identity, but rather, provides “the discursive frame in which we are identified” (p. 93). These characteristics, when combined with professional characteristics such as occupation, skill level, and level of education and training, frame our experiences, and our perceptions of those experiences, within society, and are constantly being negotiated (Gould 1994). These negotiations take place at many levels, beginning with the first stages of gender typing that begin in the earliest years of life, and continue throughout an individual’s school years and into adulthood.

If, as Dibben (2002) discusses, gender is a performative, rather than fixed, identifying characteristic, there exists the opportunity for individuals and social groups to influence others’ perceptions of what may be classified as ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ within the field of music. According to Lamb (1994), there is a great deal of documented evidence that “music is gendered through the preparation of musicians, the production of music and the reception of musical works, as well as musical performers/performances” (p. 60). Who better, then, to play a leading role in deconstructing these aspects of musical gendering than the music educator? Green (1997) defines gendered musical meanings as “discursive constructions which help us to interpret the musical world around us, [that] are actively created and recreated not only by listeners and

commentators but by male and female musicians and music educators, in our musical practices and through our musical experiences” (p. 51).

Inherent musical meanings – meanings communicated through dynamics, tempo, instrumentation, etc. - are blatantly gendered within the media in the form of music videos, television and movie character themes, and magazine images (Dibben, 2002). The media’s influence is prevalent within contemporary society, and both children and adults gain much of their understanding of music as a gendered subject outside of the classroom. Given that cultural practices of musical creation and participation also play a role in gendering music, Lamb (1994) believes that “it would be worthwhile to examine how these various representations are realized and what they mean in relation to theorizing music education” (p. 61). Thus, the incorporation of popular music, as in the work of Green (1997), in addition to structuring pedagogic discourses within a sociological framework, can aid in the de-gendering of music within the classroom. Understanding the social construction of gendered music is imperative to the process of deconstruction within the classroom. So where does this deconstruction process begin? At what level does the idea of gendering music need to be eradicated?

### *The Social Construction of Gendered Music in a Historical Context – Vocal and Instrumental Music*

Historically contextualizing women’s roles in all forms of music making helps to put the socially constructed gendering of music into perspective. This is not a new concept. Gender has played an obvious influential role in musical performance and education for more than two hundred years. It is the role of sociology to uncover and unravel the complex systems that define and construct this topic. A much-explored area of focus is that of the gendering of singing. Dibben (2002) believes that it is singing’s association with nature and the body, both of which are

associated with ‘femininity,’ that makes the activity more acceptable for women than the instrumental and other technologically-inspired ‘masculine’ musical practices more frequently attributed to men. Green (1997) notes that, historically, women’s roles as performers, administrators, and educators have reproduced a gendering of specific musical practices. She suggests that “women’s prominence in the musical salons of the nineteenth century, their roles as amateur and professional concert organisers and musical administrators in the twentieth century, and their positions as formal and informal music teachers, in convent, school and home, have acted, like singing, to reproduce femininity” (Green, 1997, p. 49).

Howe (2001) puts women’s roles within the field of instrumental music into historical context within the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She discusses the development of the high school wind band tradition as having its roots in the tradition of all-male military bands, which set the precedent of band participation as a ‘masculine’ endeavour. This socially constructed gendering of wind band practices has been reproduced for decades within the educational institution. The exclusion of women from marching bands in the United States of America meant that women were unable to “gain the skills needed to succeed in teaching high school instrumental music [in the USA]” (Howe, 2001, p. 154). It is surprising that, although this exclusion may seem like an action from a very distant past, it did not end until the twentieth century - more specifically, in 1972 at the University of Minnesota (Howe, 2001). This exclusionary behaviour was not limited to the wind band style, and women also found themselves excluded, and therefore alienated, from jazz bands and orchestras in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This alienation, however, initiated the formation of all-female wind bands, jazz bands, and orchestras, and ultimately led to a rise in the number of female high school band educators (Howe, 2001).

*The Gendering of Musical Performance practices*

The gendering of musical performance practices takes place from the perspectives of audience, music educators, and performers. In popular music culture, audiences often base their opinions of what constitutes an acceptable musical performance on the visual aspect of performance or the image and persona created and presented by the performers. These images, when viewed within the realm of pop, rock, and country, are largely gender based. As discussed by Dibben (2002), the boy band phenomenon, beginning with the Beatles in the 1950s, drew wide-spread attention to the sexualizing and idolizing of popular performers amid the excited screams and tears of their female fans. This fanatical craze has accelerated throughout the past five decades, as seen by the behaviour of fans of bands such as New Kids on the Block, N'Sync, and The Backstreet Boys. These bands, according to Dibben (2002), are often ridiculed and considered to be poor, 'feminized' imitations of more 'masculine' rock bands. She states that "within this larger social context, it may be difficult for female tastes to affirm a positive social identity since the access to power and resources to define value in the public realm is held primarily by males" (Dibben, 2002, p. 124).

In the jazz music sphere, demands on performers are considered to be such that a jazz musician's personal life, including relationships with their partners and children, must come second and third to their musical commitments. Lamb (1994) believes that for this reason "women are not taken seriously or valued professionally as band members or band leaders, but considered to be a novelty" (p. 68). Women's socially-constructed familial roles are more likely to be viewed by society as taking precedence over their musical lives than a man's role within that same context. This constructed version of where a woman's musical 'place' should be is

recognizable when viewed from a historical perspective, based on the musical performance 'norms' of public (male) versus private (female) performance (Dibben, 2002).

Also within the jazz scene, gendered instrument choice plays an important role in the inclusion or exclusion of females. Instruments commonly found in jazz, such as saxophone, trumpet, trombone, and percussion instruments, are generally associated with male musicians (McKeage, 2004). Since primary instrument choice usually happens in elementary school, it is more difficult for females to excel on jazz-related instruments in time to perform at a post-secondary or professional level, if they do not choose to play one of these instruments at this early stage (McKeage, 2004). The perception of the male jazz musician as the social 'norm', and their strong association with jazz-related instruments, has the power to segregate women from the jazz scene, both at a professional level and within the educational realm, as can be seen historically. So long as society constructs jazz-related instruments and the jazz genre as 'masculine', female jazz musicians will be seen as 'Other' within the genre.

According to Green (1997), gender delineations are closely related to performance. Socially-constructed gendered instrument associations have the potential to affect the inherent (how the music sounds) and delineated (how the music is socially and historically contextualized) meanings of music as perceived by the audience, regardless of the performance context (Green, 1997). Whether music is heard on a recording or at a live concert, if the audience is aware that a female is performing on a 'masculine' instrument, the inherent and delineated meanings of the music are likely to be interpreted differently than if a man were playing the same instrument. Just as a female instrumentalist can be viewed as interrupting her femininity by playing a 'masculine' instrument, Green (1997) states that a male performer's gender identity will likely be affirmed by that same instrument. In Green's article 'Gender Identity, Musical

Experience and Schooling' (2002), the author describes female musical performance within 'masculine' gendered styles and on 'masculine' instruments, as interrupting their femininity. The gender interruption of a female instrumentalist's performance has the potential to devalue her performance in the eyes of the audience. Given that musical performance is so closely linked to socialization, the devaluation of female musical performance also has the potential to devalue females in general within performative social contexts. These contexts may include school, church, or work-related environments (Lamb, 1994), and the social consequences within these spaces are such that a woman's gender identity may be affected among family, peers, and work colleagues.

### *Gender and Musical Identities*

According to Dibben (2002), the construction of gender identity begins within the first few years of a child's life. Social learning theory states that "children learn gendered behaviour from their environment by virtue of reinforcement, punishment and extinction of sex-inappropriate behaviour, and by exposure of boys and girls to different kinds of activities and role models." (Dibben, 2002, p.118). These processes are modelled by parents and other prominent figures within their lives whom children deem to be important and authoritative. Dibben (2002) states that sex stereotypes modelled to children, including those within the field of music performance, are enculturated by the age of about three years, and that at this age, many children already associate some instruments with specific genders.

At the elementary school level, the development of one's musical identity becomes extremely important and often closely linked to gender identity within the social sphere. The social force of peer pressure reinforces gender stereotyping in music and musical identity, especially in the selection of a primary instrument (Dibben, 2002). In a study by Griswold and



Chroback (1981), the researchers found that not only were instruments considered to be gendered by participants, but choral and instrumental conducting were also categorized as either feminine (choral) or masculine (instrumental) occupations. These delineations of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ occupations have the potential to lay a foundation for ‘pigeon-holing’ boys and girls into making specific music career choices based on gender at a very young age.

Musical taste and preference are also foundational to children’s musical identity formation in elementary school and are representative of several factors, including socioeconomic status, race, age, and gender, among others (Dibben, 2002). For a child to develop and maintain a “positive social identity” (Dibben, 2002, p. 124) among his or her peers, it is important for most to ‘belong’ to a specific social group at school. This sense of belonging, often supported by musical interaction within the classroom, boosts self-esteem and plays an integral role in the foundation of personal and musical identities. These musical interactions are often attributed to long-lasting emotional memory significance (Dibben, 2002), and can have lasting consequences on a child’s sense of self. Social interactions attributed to musical experiences in childhood also have the potential to influence a person’s future musical experiences, creating a cycle of musical reproduction. This reproduction will perpetuate the gendering of music until sociological awareness and action deconstruct the phenomenon.

### *Gendering Music in Higher Education*

Unfortunately, the cycle of gendering music and music education is perpetuated from the standpoint of both women’s roles as music educators and girls’ roles as music students. Beyond the elementary and high school level, the effect of the gendering of music can be seen at the post-secondary level among both the student body and the faculty. A study by McKeage (2004) found that the primary instruments of 628 university band member participants had strong

gender associations. Seventy-two percent of male participants - and just twenty-eight percent of female participants - played primary instruments associated with jazz music such as trumpet, trombone, and saxophone (McKeage, 2004). This study also found that the attrition rate between high school and college from jazz performance was higher among female participants (thirty-eight percent) than male participants (thirty percent). The choice, or necessity, of female students opting out of jazz programs is based on their instrument choice at the beginning of their musical education. It would seem that, due to the cap on jazz ensemble size, and therefore instrumentation variability, more women are pushed out of the jazz stream than men based on the primary instrument choice they made in elementary school (McKeage, 2004). Howe (2001) states that females generally do not choose primary instruments suited to becoming band directors or educators, such as brass instruments, affecting their ability to pursue a career in music education. A lack of female music educators at the high school and post-secondary level then “contributes to lack of role models for potential new female band directors” (Gathen, 2014, p. 65). This perpetual cycle contributes to the reproduction of gendered music education.

Providing an environment for students that fosters and encourages creativity and learning, as well as a feeling of safety from sociological issues pervading the educational institution, is imperative. These issues include gender, race, socioeconomic status, and learning differences. The role of sociology within the classroom is to provide both students and educators with a foundation of knowledge regarding these issues, generating a society of acceptance and open-mindedness among the faculty and student body. This process of socially constructing and/or deconstructing the gendering of music within the classroom begins with the music educator. The following section demonstrates one approach to this process.

### *Deconstructing Gender and Singing*

Green's (2002) study of male and female perspectives on the issue of gender within the music classroom revealed that more girls expressed interest in singing than boys. In many cultures around the world, however, male singing is revered (Welsh male choirs, for example, are a well-known phenomenon). Hall (2005) discusses the issue of boys' waning interest in singing after the age of five, and her study shows that although young boys' singing ability equals that of their female counterparts, they begin showing signs of disinterest earlier than girls, and seem to share the opinion that singing is not an activity meant for boys. This is disconcerting, as singing as a form of communication and expression is a gift that is available to all of society, regardless of gender, socioeconomic status, age, or race. How, then, do music educators navigate the issue of the gendering of singing to create an environment in which boys feel safe and open to expressing themselves through singing?

Hall's (2005) study involved a peer modelling technique in which older boys were integrated into the classroom and performed for younger students. This was an attempt to show students that singing is an activity open to all genders. It was noted that the younger boys gravitated towards the older boys in what appeared to be an attempt to befriend them, and viewed the older boys' performances with acceptance. The older boys' use of humorous repertoire engaged the younger boys' attention, making them laugh. Upon hearing the older boys sing serious western classical repertoire, however, it was noted that the younger boys also laughed, especially when the performer sang high notes. Hall (2005) speculates that the younger boys' laughter may have been a reaction to the challenging of their perceptions of what constitutes an 'acceptable' singing range and style for boys. The results showed that, over the course of the study (10 weeks), the boys' voices improved along with their level of active participation in singing activities. The peer modelling technique used in this study appears to

have been successful. The female music educator of the classes involved challenged the gender perceptions of her young male students in the safe and encouraging environment of their classroom (Hall, 2005).

*Repertoire Selection, Instrument Choice, and Diverse Musical Genre Exposure*

There are many ways by which a music educator can influence their students' musical identities and deconstruct gendered musical delineations at the elementary school level, at which point identity formation is at its most crucial. Harrison (2010) recommends teaching "repertoire that caters to difference" (p. 48). By diversifying musical repertoire within the classroom, music educators foster sensitivity to sociocultural differences among their students. Repertoire from a variety of genres encourages students to experience music in a de-gendered environment, where jazz music is no longer 'masculinized', and western classical art song is not geared towards females only. The use of popular music in the classroom provides a student-centred learning and teaching environment (Harrison, 2010; Green, 1997) that can change students' perceptions of technology-based music as a 'masculine' art form (Harrison, 2010; Dibben, 2002). Gendered music perceptions can also be managed by integrating school- or community-based role models into the learning process (Harrison, 2007).

Harrison (2010) also recommends music educators address the issue of gendered music at "significant periods in schooling" (p. 48). The transition from elementary school to high school, and from high school to post-secondary school, are important points at which music educators can help students make choices that may potentially lead to their success in the field of music, whether in performance or education. Since jazz music plays a prominent role in high school band teaching in many contexts, it is suggested (McKeage, 2004; Gathen, 2014) that music

educators remind students of this fact so that they are given the chance to choose a jazz-related instrument, if they have any interest in pursuing the music education stream.

According to Smith (2015), there is a need for more undergraduate cultural, philosophical, and sociological studies in popular music. Studies in these areas, especially by music education majors, would facilitate more popular music educator training to be implemented within the schools, thus helping to ‘de-masculinize’ popular music. Roulston and Misawa (2011) believe it is the responsibility of teacher educators to “prepare teachers to resist dominant constructions of gender that reinforce stereotypical performances of masculinity and femininity by both students and their teachers” (p.20).

### *Summary*

Music educators can facilitate equality in the classroom through various practices. These practices include exposure to musical role models in ‘de-gendered’ roles, teaching socially inclusive repertoire, assigning instruments to students that might be perceived as opposite to their ‘appropriate’ gender, emphasizing composition on computers, and focusing on popular music performance. These practices should take place at both the elementary and high school levels if music educators are to give students the opportunity to be successful in their musical pursuits at the post-secondary level.

The cycle of gendering music must be broken if women are to be more highly valued in performance and music education. Female music educators are often relegated to teaching at the elementary level, which is considered by some to be held at a lower value than high school and post-secondary teaching (Gould, 1994; Smith, 2015). This in turn leads to a lack of female role models for girls wanting to pursue music beyond elementary school. The fewer girls pursuing

instrumental music in high school, the fewer young women enrolling in music education programs at the post-secondary level. Ultimately, it seems that this cycle both ends and begins in higher education.

Perhaps higher education institutions are the point of origin for change regarding the issue of gender within the fields of music and music education. If music teacher education included a deep understanding of sociological issues within the classroom, music teacher educators could potentially be the first to break the cycle of socially constructed gender issues in music. On the other hand, is this a ‘chicken/egg’ dilemma? The problem still lies in the process of encouraging female students to make choices early in their music education which enable them to engage in music-education-gearred practices at the high school and post-secondary school levels. The work of researchers and educators currently involved in deconstructing gendered music is making its way into all levels of music education in contemporary classroom situations. This gradual implementation of sociological thinking is slowly but surely permeating the socially constructed gender ‘norms’ surrounding children’s musical identity formation, musical preferences, and instrument choices. With continued perseverance and attention to the issue of the gendering of music, perhaps the cycle can, in fact, be broken.

## References

- Bryan, J. (2014) Tomboys, sissies and “That’s so gay”: Exploring gender and sexual diversity in early childhood and elementary education. In Meyer, E.J. and Carlson, D. (Eds.) *Sexualities in education* (pp. 240-256). New York: Peter Lang.
- Dibben, N. (2002). Gender identity and music. In McDonald, R. A. R., Hargreaves, D. J., & Miell, D. (Eds.), *Musical identities* (pp. 117-133). Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gathen, K. (2014). Gender Bias and Music Education. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Digital Dissertations. (UMI 1562378).
- Gould, E. (1994). Getting the whole picture: The view from here. *Philosophy of Music Education*, 2(2): 92-98. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40327075>.
- Green, L. (1997). *Music, gender, education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Green, L. (2002). Gender identity, musical experience and schooling. In Spruce, G.. (Ed.), *Aspects of teaching secondary music: Perspectives on practice*. (pp. 53-66). London: Routledge Falmer..
- Griswold, P. A. & Chrobak, D. A. (1981). Sex-role associations of music instruments and occupations by gender and major. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 29(1): 57-62.

Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3344680>.

Hall, C. (2005). Gender and boys' singing in early childhood. *British Journal of Music*

*Education*, 22(1): 5-20. Doi: 10.1017/S0265051704005960.

Harrison, S. D. (2007). A perennial problem in gendered participation in music: What's

happening to the boys? *British Journal of Music Education*, 24(3): 267-280. Doi:

10.1017/S0265051707007577.

Harrison, S. D. (2010). Boys on the outer: Themes in male engagement with music. *Journal of*

*Boyhood Studies*, 4(1): 39-53. Doi: 10.3149/thy.0401.39.

Howe, S. W. (2001). An historical perspective on contributions of American women music

educators. *Journal of Historical Research in Music Education*, 22(2): 147-158. Retrieved

from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41300440>.

Lamb, R. (1994). Feminism as critique in philosophy of music education. *Philosophy of Music*

*Education Review*, 2(2): 59-74. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40327073>.

McKeage, K. M. (2004). Gender and participation in high school and college jazz ensembles.

*Journal of Research in Music Education*, 52(4): 343-356. Retrieved from

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3345387>.

Roulston, K. & Misawa, M. (2011). Music teachers' construction of gender in elementary

education. *Music Education Research*, 13(1): 3-28. Doi: 10.1080/14613808.2011.553275.



Smith, G. D. (2015). Masculine domination in private-sector popular music performance education in England. In P. Burnard, J. Soderman, & Y. Hofvander-Trulson (Eds.), *Bourdieu and the sociology of music, music education and research* (pp. 61-78). Farnham: Ashgate.