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Feminine Endings at Twenty

Susan McClary (UCLA)

Resumen

En este artículo la autora hace un balance retrospectivo de los veinte años transcurridos desde la publicación de la primera edición de su libro *Feminine Endings* en 1991. En él reflexiona sobre la recepción, el impacto y la influencia de esta obra dentro y fuera de la Musicología.

Abstract

In this article, the author assesses the twenty years passed since the first edition of her book *Feminine Endings* was published. She reflects upon the reception, impact and influence that her work has had inside and outside Musicology.

Palabras clave

Musicología, Feminismo, *Feminine Endings*

Key words

Musicology, Feminism *Feminine Endings*

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Feminine Endings at Twenty

Susan McClary (UCLA)

Most academic books disappear without a trace, often without even a single review. Some of my own work — the historical and theoretical research on seventeenth-century music that matters a great deal to me — only gets published because of the notoriety of my earlier career. Like other aspects of life, a scholarly reputation does not always depend upon fairness; sometimes it just comes down to luck and timing.

No one (least of all this author) could have anticipated that a drab-looking little book from the University of Minnesota Press would be cause for a twenty-year reflection.¹ Nor did its early reception suggest that *Feminine Ending* would become a classic. In fact, it won *second prize* in a competition for the best book of feminist musicology published in 1991.² Except for dozens of private e-mails from individuals claiming that the book had changed their lives and a single rave by rock critic Robert Christgau in *The Village Voice*,³ it received in public not only negative reviews but outraged, vitriolic reactions — a more than a few death threats.⁴ For any of you aspiring to change the fundamental precepts of a discipline, allow me to report that it's not always a barrel of laughs.

I had had relatively modest hopes for *Feminine Endings*: I intended merely to bring the kinds of issues long circulating within the humanities and social sciences into musicology. Feminists in other fields had already spent years documenting the semiotics of gender difference and misogyny in literature, visual art, philosophy, film, history, and even the hard sciences. And after withstanding reprisals from male colleagues, these women had eventually managed to transform their disciplines; they survived the attacks largely by banding together intellectually for the sake of a common cause and supporting one another.⁵ But just as *Feminine Endings* appeared, a new generation of scholars — heralded most prominently by Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* — had

¹ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991; 2nd edition, 2002).

² First prize went to *The Musical Woman: An International Perspective, Vol III: 1986-1990*, ed. Judith Zaimont, Jane Gottlieb, Joanne Polk, and Michael J. Rogan (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1991).

³ Robert Christgau, "Theory of the Rhythmic Class," *The Village Voice* (June 4, 1991); available on-line at: <http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/bkrev/mcclary-91.php>

⁴ See, for instance, Leo Treitler, "Gender and Other Dualities of Music History," in Ruth A. Solie, *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 23-45; and Pieter van den Toorn, "Politics, Feminism, and Contemporary Music Theory," *Journal of Musicology* 9, no. 3 (Summer 1991): 275-99. See also Ruth A. Solie, "What Do Feminists Want? A Reply to Pieter van den Toorn," *Journal of Musicology* 9, no. 4 (Autumn 1991): 399-410.

⁵ For a collection of twenty-seven first-hand accounts, see *True Confessions: Feminist Professor Tell Stories Out of School*, ed. Susan Gubar (New York: Norton, forthcoming). My essay is titled "The Making of a Feminist Musicologist."

moved on to what they considered the next stage, which involved questioning the very category of “woman” and leveling the charge of “essentialism” at anyone who would undertake gender-based analysis.⁶

Looking back, I realize that my timing could not have been worse from this point of view. Keep in mind the fact that the anti-essentialist turn occurred at least fifteen years after second-wave feminists had started critiquing the canonic texts of their respective fields of specialization. This kind of work, which had not appeared yet in musicology, was what I was attempting to bring to the table in *Feminine Endings*. But when the attacks began (indeed some of them occurred even before the book appeared), many of my female colleagues took refuge in the argument that to identify as a woman, even for the sake of political solidarity, was to fall prey to essentialism. Armed with their copies of Butler, they joined in condemning the book, often more savagely than the men in the profession.⁷

As a result, that project of examining constructions of gender in classical music never really happened. What followed instead was the emergence of what I call feminist apologetics, in which musicologists rushed to demonstrate that the canonic composers were really feminists all the way along. By adopting this strategy, no one had to risk alienating the male establishment; the great composers became even greater by virtue of their prescient political correctness. One could be a feminist while maintaining one’s status as a good girl within the discipline — and also laying claim to a higher standard of theoretical soundness. As Schoenberg said when he was asked if he were that dreadful composer: “Someone had to be, and no one else wanted to, so I took it on myself”; no one else wanted to be Susan McClary either, given the public battering to which I was being subjected.⁸

The smoke finally cleared, however. *Feminine Endings* is now in its second edition; it has been translated into several languages; its chapters show up as required reading in countless course syllabi. If I made my reputation by being the *femme fatale* of musicology, that reputation opened up opportunities I never could have imagined. As the years have passed, I have become less a

⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge: 1990). See also her *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁷ See in particular Paula Higgins, “Women in Music, Feminist Criticism, and Guerrilla Musicology: Reflections on Recent Polemics,” *19th Century Music* 17, no 2 (Autumn 1993): 174-92; Elaine Barkin, “either/or,” *Perspectives of New Music* 30, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 224-32; and Elizabeth Sayrs, “Deconstructing McClary: Narrative, Feminine Sexuality, and Feminism in Susan McClary’s *Feminine Endings*,” *College Music Symposium* 33/34 (1993/1994): 41-55.

⁸ For a careful analysis of the fiasco by a scholar who specializes in rhetoric, see Barbara Tomlinson, *Feminism and Affect at the Scene of Argument: Beyond the Trope of the Angry Feminist* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), especially chapter 4.

cause célèbre than a *grande dame*.

Yet what I had envisioned as a *vade mecum* became — and remains — something of an isolated artifact. Along with Marcia Citron's *Gender and the Musical Canon*, which also appeared in 1991, and Ruth Solie's *Musicology and Difference*, it stands among the few traces of second-wave feminism within musicology.⁹ And I very much regret the fact that the book and its reception had the effect of closing down the enterprise of feminist criticism in music studies before it really got started. I myself stopped working in this area for the most part, given that I appeared to be causing more problems than solutions. In retrospect, I would have to say that *Feminine Endings* had an overwhelmingly negative impact on the subfield of feminist musicology.

Yet the book scarcely disappeared from view. Whatever its public reception, *Feminine Endings* has encouraged a number of scholars who would count as my intellectual grandchildren to address with renewed vigor the issues it raised. Too young to have participated in the quarrel between second- and third-wave feminists that brought much of this conversation to a halt, they simply grab onto whatever ideas or suggestions they find there and pursue them for their own purposes. But what kept the book circulating in the meantime?

First, it spoke to the conversations then on-going in other disciplines. Most of the chapters in *Feminine Endings* started out as talks in feminist literary or film conferences, and I had worked to develop ways of communicating my ideas to scholars who had no particular musical expertise but who welcomed anyone who could bring such information to their conversations. Strangely enough, the parts of the book that engage most seriously with “the music itself” were designed for those audiences. Within the context of a conference paper, I could, of course, play my examples, using bodily gesture and facial expression to guide my listeners. But very few of them ever failed to follow my arguments — and none of them ever charged me with abusing an ineffable art form or with essentialism. Those audiences always included cutting-edge feminist theorists.

I have continued to participate in these interdisciplinary conversations. I had hoped *Feminine Endings* would lead other musicologists to do with much greater frequency; I should not be the only music-scholar represented in Susan Gubar's *True Confessions* (see again n. 5) And as many of

⁹ Marcia J. Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Solie, *Musicology and Difference* (see again n. 4).

my graduate students have discovered, scholars from the humanities and social sciences long for individuals who are willing to speak to them about music.

Yet any venture outside the home discipline must take into account the needs of the particular audience. Although this enterprise has never required me to water down my ideas, it does force me to think very seriously about the codes we commonly use with one another within musicology. Do listeners who do not specialize in music really need to have the words “Neapolitan Sixth” thrown at them? And if that configuration turns out to be important (as it very often truly is), then how should I go about explain its effects?

Having to unpack technical terms in this fashion has allowed me to speak quite effectively to those in other fields. But it has also greatly enhanced my teaching of music students and my writing aimed at other specialists. For I have learned that many professional musicians have only hazy and ahistorical notions concerning basic concepts such as “tonality”: our mastery of an arcane jargon has allowed us to cover up such inadequacies.¹⁰

In any case, *Feminine Endings* has always had a substantial interdisciplinary readership, in large part because it communicates with other kinds of readers. We need much more work of this sort, whether feminist or not. As Hayden White wrote about twenty years ago, musicologists borrow ideas from historians all the time, but we rarely give anything in return;¹¹ we just take our newly-acquired methods back to our insular community and show them off like shiny new gadgets. The same is too often true of our relationships to the other fields — literary theory, philosophy, sociology, anthropology — upon which we draw.

Engaging productively in interdisciplinary work means learning the concerns and vocabularies of those with whom we wish to interact. It also means, however, figuring out how the evidence made available by music might corroborate or sometimes even challenge dominant models in other fields. If music has nothing of significance to add to historical or cultural thought, then we should stay within our own domains. But I believe that music in all its manifestations grants all of us a unique mode of access to powerful articulations of human feelings and ideologies. It should not be treated as mere entertainment (not even pop music) or untouchable “art,” least of all by those of us trained to understand how it operates.

¹⁰ For a succinct diagnosis of this problem, see Stanley Cavell, “Music Discomposed,” in his *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 186.

¹¹ Hayden White, “Form, Reference, and Ideology in Musical Discourse,” afterword to *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries*, ed. Steven Paul Scher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

* * *

A second reason for the continuing life of *Feminine Endings* involves its participation in what came to be called “New Musicology” or, better (and as it is called by scholars in the UK), critical musicology. For if it did not end up sparking a feminist revolution, it did feature prominently among the books that advocated the *interpretation* of music. Along with the work of Rose Rosengard Subotnik, Lawrence Kramer, Robert Walser, and Richard Leppert, among others, *Feminine Endings* featured the critical analysis of classical and popular musics within their social contexts.¹²

This should not have qualified as a new endeavor: such writing occurred as a matter of course before World War II. But the linking of music interpretation with censorship during Nazi and Soviet régimes led musicologists in liberal societies to disavow interpretation or any kind of work not subject to the stringent terms of positivism. Consequently, they concentrated during the postwar years on the production of modern editions and the excavation of archives — both indispensable activities.¹³

For a wide variety of reasons, however, my loose cluster of renegades wanted more: responding in part to the extraordinary work in cultural criticism occurring in other fields, we wished to bring those same kinds of questions to the study of music. If gender and sexuality served as the particular lens through which I viewed music in *Feminine Endings*, I also dealt extensively in the book with many other frameworks — colonialism, race, psychology, social class, cultural hierarchy — within which one might begin to dislodge the prohibition against interpreting music. I would claim, in other words, that the book’s principal contribution was methodological.

Feminist musicologists have frequently charged that *Feminine Endings* did not focus sufficiently on female artists. But given that my interests involve understanding how the music itself makes sense, I could scarcely deal with music by women without also trying to come to terms

¹² See Rose Rosengard Subotnik, *Developing Variations: Style and Ideology in Western Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), and *Deconstructive Variations: Music and Reason in Western Society* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Richard Leppert, *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993); Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993); Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800-1900* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), and especially *Interpreting Music* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011).

¹³ For a cultural analysis and critique of postwar musicology, see Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986). Kerman’s book proved highly influential for the scholars listed in n. 12.

with the conventions of the largely-male traditions within which they had always operated. In the absence of a vocabulary for engaging with musical meanings of any kind, I believed I had to begin constructing methods — not only with isolated female composers but with the tradition itself as well. During the 1980s, a cluster of women in the visual arts, literature, and film had worked self-consciously to change not only the subject matter of their chosen media but also the very modes of construction. I chose to write about a few women — Diamanda Galas, Janika Vandervelde, Laurie Anderson, Madonna — who seemed to me to be doing something similar within music. Pardon me, but this is not essentialism.¹⁴

Without the kinds of projects associated with critical musicology, one cannot deal with signification in music. It is possible to undertake biographical studies or to publish scores, of course, and numerous feminist musicologists have done outstanding work in these areas. But the music itself and the differences it might make with respect to expression or new ways of experiencing the self remain out of reach. With the analytical tools developed over the course of the last twenty years, however, we can begin to undertake interpretive readings of pieces. And this unlocks not only allows us to assess music by women but also by canonic men and by composers from anywhere other than Germany or Austria between Bach and Mahler.

My work focuses particularly on seventeenth-century repertoires, which (like the music of women) have usually been dismissed as incoherent or frivolous — especially those composed for the French court. For this project, I have had to learn to understand mainstream tonality and its formal conventions as expressing a particular set of values, values not shared by many other groups of people who consequently write in very different ways. French music, for example, works in extremely sophisticated ways to simulate a peculiarly static sense of temporality: not superior to that of emerging German procedures but also not inferior.¹⁵

So long as we accept the analytical models developed specifically for the aggrandizement of German and Italian musics, we will continue to regard other repertoires — whether by French,

¹⁴ When a prominent male musicologist once accused me of being an essentialist, I asked him to define what he meant by the word. He replied: “It’s someone who thinks it’s essential to talk about gender.” For another attempt at addressing contemporary female composers (Pauline Oliveros, Meredith Monk, Joan Tower), see my “Different Drummers: Interpreting Music by Women Composers,” *Frauen- und Männerbilder in der Musik: Festschrift für Eva Rieger*, ed. Freia Hoffmann, Jane Bowers, and Ruth Heckmann (Oldenburg: Bibliotheks- und Informationssystem der Universität Oldenburg, 2000), 113-26.

¹⁵ See my *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000); *Desire and Pleasure in Seventeenth-Century Music* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, forthcoming); and *Structures of Feeling in Seventeenth-Century Expressive Culture*, ed. McClary (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming).

Spanish, English, Polish, African-American, gay, Venezuelan, Korean, Finnish, or female composers — as second-rate and unworthy of attention. To be sure, those who have enjoyed the privilege of identifying with music long favored as universal or absolute will squawk when dislodged from their hegemonic position. But musicology as a whole can only benefit from this leveling of the playing field.

Fortunately I am no longer alone in this endeavor. Other feminist musicologists have also made extraordinary contributions in this area. To name but a few working in my own historical period: Suzanne Cusick, who has produced a definitive biography of Francesca Caccini and the gendering of power in the early seventeenth-century Medici court; Wendy Heller, who has analyzed the characterizations of women in Venetian opera; Georgia Cowart, who has examined the influence of libertines and female intellectuals in the France of Louis XIV; Judith Peraino, who has ranged across periods and cultural hierarchies in her study of “queer” voices through out music history.¹⁶

The discipline of music theory has also opened up recently in directions influenced by critical musicology. When *Feminine Endings* first appeared, theorists were mostly engaged in formalist analysis, and some of the most powerful attacks came from those who objected to the fact that I did not abide strictly by pitch-related analysis. The last ten years, however, have witnessed the emergence of scholars who regard “music theory” as also including cultural theory, with previously forbidden topics such as metaphor, gesture, the body, and temporality now showcased in conferences and publications.¹⁷ This development has led me to be hailed quite unexpectedly as a distinguished music theorist¹⁸

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¹⁶ Suzanne Cusick, *Francesca Caccini at the Medici Court: Music and the Circulation of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Wendy Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence: Opera and Women’s Voices in Seventeenth-Century Venice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004); Georgia Cowart, *The Triumph of Pleasure: Louis XIV and the Politics of Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Judith Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005).

¹⁷ See, for example, Lawrence Zbikowski, *Conceptualizing Music: Cognitive Structure, Theory, and Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

¹⁸ In October 2010, I was appointed Music Theorist in Residence for the Dutch-Flemish Society for Music Theorist, and I conducted a seminar at the Mannes Institute for Advanced Studies in Music Theory in June 2010. My keynote address for 2009 meeting of the Society for Music Theory, “In Praise of Contingency: The Powers and Limits of Theory,” appears in *Music Theory On-Line* 16, no. 1 (January 2010), at: <http://mto.societymusictheory.org/issues/mto.10.16.1/mto.10.16.1.mcclary.html>

Finally, *Feminine Endings* has had an unexpected influence on creative artists. Quite a large number of composers (as many of them men as women) have written pieces in reaction to the ideas presented in the book, and a few visual artists have produced whole exhibitions inspired by my verbal imagery. It is this creative response — the fact that new works of art now exist in the world in part as a result of my work — that makes me happiest.

I never know in advance the form this influence will take, for I do not set out recipes in the book for how to compose. I do, however, engage with the ways in which musical strategies produce meaning. In a world in which musicians are still trained to think exclusively in terms of pitch sets and structures, chastised by their teachers for reacting emotionally to what they hear, *Feminine Endings* not only encourages affective responses but also offers a vocabulary for explaining how pitches and expression connect.

As a result, I have been invited to lead workshops for composers in Sweden and elsewhere — not because I am myself a composer but because I can listen to a piece and then dare to put into words what I hear and understand. More than that, I can explain why I think the artistic choices made by the young composers in question matter. Many of their pieces have nothing explicitly to do with gender. But the array of skills and insights presented in *Feminine Endings* may be appropriated and utilized in countless ways.

In Stockholm in October 2010, I attended a concert of music by women, organized by composer Karin Rehnquist, and was thrilled to hear some of the noisiest, most rhythmic emphatic music I have ever experienced. I could not have predicted their responses to the question “what might women composers sound like?”; I just sat back and marveled at the energy and brilliance of their creations. Isn’t free, exuberant expression finally what we all want?

* * *

I began this retrospective with a somewhat bitter tone, detailing the difficulties I encountered when I first released this book, for I think it is important to remember the obstacles that new ideas confront. My students now find it hard to believe that something that seems to them so self-evident as *Feminine Endings* can have had such a violent reception. In his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn explains that paradigm shifts always provoke this kind of animosity at a

first, only to become eventually the obvious way of doing things.¹⁹

Along with work by other critical and feminist musicologists, *Feminine Endings* has helped to bring about a profound paradigm shift in music studies. Many areas of investigation previously unimaginable now dominate meetings of the American Musicological Society and the Society for Music Theory. Gradually these kinds of projects are also appearing throughout East Asia, Europe, Latin America, and Australia.

A twentieth-anniversary party for a book signals a certain kind of victory, and I am delighted to find it celebrated after all these years. But its success (or survival) should not encourage complacency. It's time for someone to come up with another paradigm shift — one that genuinely includes an emphasis on women and critical methods within a mutually supportive environment. It's time, in short, for new feminine beginnings.

Susan McClary

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Cita recomendada

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¹⁹ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).