

# In Her Own Words: Practitioner Contribution 1

ELIZABETH HOFFMAN

As I sit contemplating where my story as a practising, then aspiring, and finally professional woman composer begins, I immerse myself fleetingly in fragments of feminist Beat poet Diane di Prima's *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*. I am moved by her embodied flailings as she searches in the 1960s for 'what [womanhood] is [or, was]. How to do it. Or get through it. Or bear it. Or sparkle like ice underfoot'.<sup>1</sup> On my desk, too, is Suzanne G. Cusick's intricately researched portrait of seventeenth-century Medici court composer Francesca Caccini, and the 'circulation of power' that governed her personal and professional lives.<sup>2</sup> One passage from this book's Introduction catches a nerve, in sympathetic vibration: 'we do not so much need rooms of our own . . . as [we do] ways of being . . . that allow us to engage with the often immobilising and silencing effects of gender norms'.<sup>3</sup>

It's been at the professional level that such immobilisations – metaphorical brakes and roadblocks – have been a norm for me. I feel acclimated, but they drain energy. If, as Judith Butler contends, gender is constructed performance,<sup>4</sup> I hope I appear more like a drought-resistant tree than one with branches breaking under snow. It often feels like the latter. A thriving persona is hard to construct, since a tired battling of the elements is constant. The 'No-Exit-like' societal gaze never ends. This has fostered my empathy for others, and encouraged me to intervene in contexts that reinforce in- and out-group formation. Gender often seems an arbitrary marker; but sexism, like racism, has a distinct set of mechanisms and debilitating effects.

\*\*\*

My earliest memories of musical aspirations still haunt me with complex feelings. I knew very young that my mom had given up music 'to have a family'. I learned later that she also gave up poetry and ballet. This made me angry since I wanted to tell her she shouldn't have. Despite this, it was my mom who instilled in me subtle musical sensitivity, and awe of music as a magical internal locus. And, yet, she lacked the confidence to coach me or to share her opinions at all. Perhaps my mom's own received messaging as

a young adult was not unlike that conveyed to Cusick's Caccini, who 'would learn (by play) to lead a virtuous, chaste, industrious, and useful life'.<sup>5</sup> Both cathecting and rejecting, I was determined by the time I was eight or so not to lead a (purely) useful life.

I understood even then that the genders were somehow on opposite sides of a divide, but I didn't realise that music – its practice and creation – was tethered in the cavernous gap. How could something so beautiful be anything but transformative? I ridiculed my first piano teacher's assurance that women lacked the 'stamina' to concertise. (She was eccentric, had stamina, told me nuns had cracked rulers on her fingers, and didn't seem to like music much.) But, she wasn't alone in sharing opinions about musicking rules in a gendered world. Conservatory audition faculty told me that my Beethoven Op. 26 lacked 'masculinity'. Who trained or ordained them to assess performative gender quotients? Perhaps my nascent awareness of music's entanglement with feminism was galvanised then, since I did run to recover in a room of my own. Longer term, I internalised the experiential fact that I always had to prove myself. As a daily diet, if you are what you eat, this is constant malnourishment.

My education in college broadened but did not include women's music courses; there were none. I had to wait until the 1990s to ask the rhetorical Beethoven interpretation question above. I met Susan McClary in John Rahn's Feminist Music Theory class during graduate study. But I was unaware feminism had much left to do; rarely to that point had I felt 'exceptional' due to my class status as opposed to imagined personal deficits. I recall discomfort hearing the narrative of a housemate: she was a Chinese engineer receiving job nibbles given her qualifications and given the non-interference (it's easy to infer) of her gender-unclear first name. She never proceeded past the interview stages that followed the 'Dear Mr. . . .' letter invites. Still, in a hopeful bubble, I didn't see music as a male-dominated field. I felt at ease amidst ponytailed male computer programmers in grad school performing their own intervention in masculinity, and I was mostly validated by my professors. A sense of feminine handicap appeared later, as a shock, in my academic job context.

A sundry list of the workplace distractions I've navigated for decades would not be exceptional in itself, but the items newly unsettle me when clustered: (1) being asked to do the same job as a male colleague without equal compensation; (2) being told explicitly by numerous male colleagues of all ranks over a fifteen-year span that I am unsuited for leadership; (3) being routinely excluded from integral discussion of needs and solutions for a programme that I co-direct. I've heard of female colleagues told by

administrators that their awards would be strategically omitted from mention to avoid overshadowing a male colleague. I was told as a first-year hire not to apply for a grant that a mid-level male faculty might also be competing for. I hear frequent tales of conference harassment. One recent story with a visual pathos: an unwanted public display of a tap on the rear by someone with a power differential, congratulating a presenter.

Yes, this is breathtaking from a foothold in the #MeToo era. The status quo hasn't changed much, so far as I've seen over my career. I'm happy to know that my hire into a composition programme was a productive event on the diversity front. I'm the first female in my department to have advanced from Assistant to tenured. Support from the university would have been welcome along the way; individuals isolated by discrimination deserve to have their challenges acknowledged by any system that is part of the dysfunction. Technology has become especially meaningful for me as a medium in which to question what creative tools mean, how they work, who makes them, and how it feels to use them in this gendered world. Especially since there's still few women full professors in music composition or technology, a trusted confidante for coping with layered aspects of power differentials is invaluable. Elaine and Meg are, for me, two pillars. So are former students, many now academics. Current students are equally savvy, though rarely see the whole landscape. I am glad about this, but finding ways to share, mentor, and yet protect is challenging. It is important to remember that official patriarchal narratives are not the only problems in musicological discourse; historiographies include the thoughts in our heads. It's important to note that women faculty may have steeper norms to circumnavigate than students, since students buttress narratives of dependence and colleagues generally don't. A hopeful caveat is that gender trouble does not lie under every unturned rock. Many male colleagues see women as people first, and many men are allies and supporters of women. The #MeToo and Bystander Intervention movements have provided new forms of camaraderie.

\*\*\*

It's remarkable that music's comfort envelops a listener regardless of gender, colour, ethnicity, class. For me, attachment to music was immediate. I heard my mom play Chopin before I was born; I composed small pieces before I knew what composing was. A male college teacher took my composition activities seriously. For that last historical punctum, I'm grateful, since musicking is my life. If the music we write is a series of actions that embody instructions to recreate a set of actions, then our 'making

a certain kind of music produces a certain kind of person'.<sup>6</sup> Increasingly, I believe that I compose my psychological wholeness – not through identification with the role of 'composer' or 'woman composer', but through self-discovery and affirmation. Mostly, I write music for its own sake, that is, for how it makes me feel in creating it, and for the sheer residual satisfaction of having used one's imagination reaching for a no-premises-involved creative thought. I cherish serendipitous discoveries with collaborators. In the face of dispiriting gender divides in the professional realm, making music and talking about it is, for me, a self-sustaining act, ideally, fancifully, a purifying force for good in the world.

How does one practise more applied forms of resilience through musical activity? In teaching I can set my own codes of professionalism and form my own assessments of what's best for a student despite the often-unwritten rules and layered agendas that shape much of what we do. I can interact with institutions or individuals as I choose, in response to their politics and values. Pre-empting gender-coded critiques is important. Men who don't show for meetings are more frequently *de facto* 'busy' academics, while women last to arrive are *de facto* 'cavalier'. This is familiar terrain that impacts our socialising and teaching. It is the adjudicating that is so harmful. We all are, after all, just people. Finding ways to be a pleasant irritant, dispassionately sharing passion rather than frustration in promoting awareness of gender-norm-laden behaviours seems a valuable skill. It's essential for women students to see this, since otherwise the – mostly subliminal – messaging around them will be set to repeat the cycles of marginalisation. Finally, the most gratifying act for me: I can write the music I wish to write. I hope to assure students through example that music doesn't need validation by the patriarchy or by an institution, usually patriarchal. The work–life balance message for women is a double-edged sword, since they are just as free to be obsessively focused on work as anyone. But for those who want balance, especially single moms, accommodation and support are deserved.

My essay's conclusion aspires towards positivity. For me, there exists a community of awe-inspiring women from whom I've derived strength for decades. They're vibrant role models, infinitely varied in their resistance to the status quo of subtle and overt exclusionary practices. I have shared rich conversation about sound and personal triumphs and tribulations with composers Annea Lockwood, Judy Klein, Daria Semegen, Diane Thome (my graduate advisor), Abbie Conant, Linda Dusman, Miya Masaoka, Lee Heurmann, Maria de Alvear, Linda Dusman, Yvonne Troxler, Shiau-uen Ding, Elizabeth Adams, Mara Helmuth, Laurie Spiegel, and others; and

musicologists Gascia Ouzounian, Brigid Cohen, Annie Randall, and more; and, mea culpa, I am leaving out countless inspirational colleagues – including male friends and colleagues, and current and former students of all genders. Musicologist Suzanne Cusick, from whom I learn something even in the most mundane but literary emails: thank you. If challenges lead to tighter friendships, there is a silver lining in being a woman composer.

In figuring out ‘how to do it, [. . . or at least how to] get through it’,<sup>7</sup> I have come to value my female friendships as a special category of relationship. We can reclaim the value of gendered norms as we dismantle the rubric slowly. In my music I cultivate interconnected listening pathways, and sensorially weighted complexities; I write music that aspires to move in much the way that I like to converse with people who make me feel alive, and happy to be sharing time with them through conversation.

Hyper-sensitised to the trauma of living as a woman in our culture, I perceive within seconds whether someone sees me as ‘woman’ or as a ‘person’. If the former, I brace myself, searching for creative modes of response, treating the interchange as research. Through it all (i.e. my stories of frustration) my dad now thumps his chest proudly, saying ‘Me, Too, Me, Too’ so routinely that I, too, feel pride, pleasure, and support from that simple performative gesture by someone who has come to understand. The challenges of being a woman in the world are becoming increasingly evident to those who care to see a future that is more inclusive in its distribution of power and resources, and in its allowances for those who wish to contribute, using our imagination and lived experience to prompt a better world in which music continues to be a profound part.

## Notes

1. Diane di Prima, *Recollections of My Life as a Woman* (New York: Viking, 2001), 27.
2. Suzanne G. Cusick, *Francesca Caccini at the Medici Court: Music and the Circulation of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
3. Suzanne G. Cusick, *Francesca Caccini at the Medici Court*, xxiv.
4. See in particular, Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).
5. *Ibid.*, 5.
6. *Ibid.*, xxiv.
7. Diane di Prima, *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, 27.

