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Gender in Jazz and Classical Music: Instrument Choice, Demographic Discrepancies, and Heroic
Expectations

In Rimsky Korsakov's *Scheherazade*, the story's heroine, named Scheherazade, is represented throughout the piece by a violin solo. In Richard Wagner's opera *Siegfried*, the hero, named Siegfried, is associated with a French horn solo, commonly known as the "Long Call". While both solos embody the protagonists of their stories, they convey two very different messages about what is acceptable for and expected from a hero. In *Siegfried*, the solo is quite rhythmically simple and rondo-esque in nature. It conveys power, especially in its final phrases, where the hornist crescendos, accelerates, and ascends until the final note: a C6, often considered the practical limit of the horn's upper range. The sheer strength and endurance required of the soloist reflect the expectations of a typical masculine hero: power, confidence, and bravery. Indeed, this is how Siegfried is portrayed: dumb, but fearless and powerful (Wagner). He is the type of hero that slays dragons. Scheherazade, however, is not necessarily portrayed as strong by the music; certainly not in the same way as Siegfried. One factor is that the violin simply cannot play as loud as the horn. It will never project the same raw power. Instead, the solo consists of highly technical passages, and many of the later variations implement double stops, where two strings are played at once, adding additional layers of harmony. This complexity suggests nuance and intelligence rather than raw power. Indeed, Scheherazade is a clever character, telling stories

to her husband-king-captor so that he does not kill her (*Scheherazade* / *Rimsky-Korsakov's* *Orchestral Suite* / *Britannica*).

The above examples are just two ways in which gender functions in music, but there are many more. This paper will be limited to analyzing the workings of gender in jazz and classical¹ music. These genres are distanced from the realm of popular music, and the groups that perform these types of music are generally larger, making them useful when analyzing how gender affects the musicians themselves. Additionally, much of the information and ideas conveyed by popular music is in the words, but in classical and jazz the information contained just in the sound is frequently dominant. Often, sounds are the only information that the listener is presented with. To study the way musicians are affected by gender, I examined the distributions of instrument choice by gender and the makeup of professional orchestras by gender. Also, I examined how different structures in jazz and classical ensembles create differences in how men and women are treated. To study the way gender works in the music itself, I compared the ways two different pieces that tell a story portray their characters. I found that in classical and jazz music, women are disproportionately negatively impacted by gendering of instruments, they are more likely to experience discrimination and harassment, and music often serves to reinforce the ideas about what is acceptable and normal based on gender.

The Musicians: Instrument Choice

For most American students, instrument choice happens around fifth or sixth grade. This first act in one's musical career usually defines the instrument that a student will stick with for as

¹ In this paper, "classical music" refers to all symphonic and operatic music, not just music of the classical era.

long as they continue making music. Despite most stating the most important reasons for choosing their instruments being the sound, their parents, and their middle school music teacher, there are very significant differences in the choice of instruments between students of different genders (Doubleday 35). Doubleday's 1993 study found that flute, clarinet, and oboe are some of the most strongly female-gendered instruments, while trumpet, tuba, baritone, and trombone (the whole brass family except for horn²) were the most strongly male dominated instruments. The distribution of instrument choice by gender has not changed significantly as of 2008 (Sergeant and Himonides 9). Additionally, harp was found to be the most strongly female dominated instrument, with violin, viola, and cello also favoring female demographics.

Given that students generally have little experience in the musical world when they choose their instrument, it is likely that they are highly influenced by the societal expectations of instruments and sounds. Though it is difficult to identify the source of this gendering, it is notable that there is a strong correlation between the tessitura of an instrument and the vocal range of the dominant gender. This is not the sole cause of this gender discrepancy as cello, a female-gendered instrument, plays in a low range, acting as the tenor voice of the string section. Since both music and gender are social constructs, it is likely the underlying socialization³ of music and gender that causes them to be so intertwined and associate vibrations of air with any meaning. For the rest of this paper, I will assume that the choice of instrument based on gender is correlated with the actual gendering of those instruments.

² The French horn is often referred to plainly as the "horn". I will use the two terms interchangeably throughout this paper.

³ This reminds me of Sally Hasslinger's "Gender and Social Construction: Who? What? When? Where? How?" but I was unable to include it without deviating too far from the necessary evidence for my argument.

Despite there being a number of female dominated instruments in middle school students' choice of instruments, professional orchestras, have a much more male dominated demographic. While violin 2, flute, and violin were found to be slightly more female, the difference was small with proportions of women of 57.9%, 57%, and 51.8%, respectively. The only instrument that remained strongly female-dominated was harp, at 87.8% (Sergeant and Himonides 3). The decrease in the proportion of women in professional orchestras suggests that somewhere along the line of classical music education, women are being pushed out. This is despite the practice of blind auditions which was implemented specifically so that musicians could not be discriminated against during the hiring process. This discrepancy will be slow to change due to the long tenure of orchestra musicians, meaning that women entering professional orchestras will continue to face a male-dominated field. This male domination, especially in brass sections, creates an environment that is not conducive to facilitating a sense of belonging among women in these sections. Not only is a strong sense of belonging correlated with a 56% increase in job performance⁴, but lacking a sense of belonging was one of the top three factors reported to have caused workers to leave their jobs during the Great Resignation (Lee). Given the difficulty of landing a full-time position, or even any position, in a professional orchestra, a lack of belonging may cause more female musicians to leave their positions and be unable to find another job, or they may even leave music entirely.

Overall, the gendering of musical instruments hurts women more than men. One could argue that men are also hurt by this gendering because they may feel uncomfortable choosing an

⁴ This study was measuring job performance in a more traditional work setting, but attempting to quantify performance in something as subjective as music makes little sense. Instead, I will generalize this to a more abstract view of performance to include qualities such as musicality, section cohesion, and accuracy. These qualities remain important for musicians auditioning for positions.

instrument that is viewed by society as a “female instrument”, or those who already play a female-gendered instrument might face judgment for their instrument choice. Though these are valid points, women are still hurt more. Not only are boys more likely to deviate from the gender norms for instruments, suggesting that they feel less social pressure to pick an instrument deemed appropriate by society, but girls were about two thirds as likely as boys to prefer their current instrument, suggesting that music teachers favor boy’s choices when assigning instruments (Fortney et al. 36). For example, the saxophone, one of the most popular instruments was 72% male and 28% female, but approximately equal proportions of boys and girls said they would prefer saxophone over their current instruments. To form a balanced ensemble, music teachers cannot always give students their first-choice instruments, especially if it is popular, like saxophone, and instead must move a few students to their second or third choice. In this study, there were more boys than girls, yet girls still were much more likely to prefer a different instrument over their current instrument. The precise reason that this occurred can not be known from the study, but it is clear that girls were disproportionately negatively impacted by this mystery mechanism.

The Musicians: Informal Systems and Standardized Discrimination

In jazz, musicians pride themselves on being able to play pieces of music (referred to as charts) in many different keys. Still, there is often one key that is considered canonical, which is often, but not always, the key that the composer wrote it in. These keys are usually the first key that a musician learns a jazz standard in, but it presents a problem for female vocalists: canonical keys frequently do not match the vocal range for female jazz vocalists. Despite female vocalists being much more common than male vocalists, the canonical keys much more frequently match

the keys of male vocal renditions than for female vocal renditions. This issue of unideal keys for female vocalists primarily affects young, inexperienced vocalists who might not have the skill to maintain the desired sound throughout the higher registers, the experience to recognize that a different key would be beneficial, or the respect from the band leader to ask the band to perform a chart in a preferred key (Forbes 5).

Unfortunately, the issues in jazz extend far beyond canonical keys. Because jazz ensembles often lack the formal structure of classical orchestras, female musicians in jazz are often disadvantaged in many ways. “Old boys’ networks” are common, excluding female musicians from job opportunities and the sense of camaraderie common between male musicians. The lack of HR departments, codes of conduct, and bylaws means that there are no checks on abuses of power. Women in jazz often experience abuse of power, sexual harassment, bullying, and more unfavorable conditions (Johnson 5). With this kind of treatment, it is little surprise that jazz is so male-dominated, with approximately 85% of jazz musicians being male (McAndrew and Widdop). This is also associated with the earlier discussed gendering of musical instruments. The primary instruments in a jazz band are trumpet, trombone, and saxophone, and although the saxophone is not as strongly male-dominated as trumpet and trombone in Fortney et al., a typical jazz saxophone section consists of a baritone saxophone, two tenor saxophones, and two alto saxophones. Extending the trend of instruments with lower tessitura being more male-dominated, it is likely that jazz saxophone sections are also quite male-dominated. Indeed, in my experience, this is the case.

The epitome of masculinity in jazz is the trumpet. Jokes about the ego of trumpet players are abundant. Though they might be jokes, they hold a not insignificant amount of truth. Trumpet players must exert an extraordinary amount of effort to produce the highest notes required of

them, regardless of the efficiency of their technique. Any sort of timidity serves only to hinder the player, so overconfidence and arrogance can in many ways serve a trumpet player well. Solos in jazz, especially those of the trumpet, typically consist of the soloist trying to show off in any way possible. Playing the coolest, most technically challenging licks is rewarded by the audience. It checks all of the boxes for typical masculinity: “displays of physical prowess, the projection of confidence, swagger, and other demonstrations of fitness” (Johnson 15). Femininity in jazz is rewarded with little glory. A beautiful, subtle ballad in the middle of a set may speak to some, but Erroll Garner’s *Misty* has nothing on the fame and recognition of Glen Miller’s *In The Mood*. In the movie *Sun Valley Serenade*, a performance of *In the Mood* appears and when the trumpet player takes his solo, a young woman is depicted looking adoringly at him, apparently impressed by his cool confidence (*Glenn Miller - In The Mood | Colorized (1941) 4K*). The groovy, and impressive pieces that give soloists to show off their supreme masculinity are a core part of jazz.

The music: heroes, dragons, and evil kings

As mentioned earlier, the solos of *Siegfried* and *Scheherazade* contain ideas about gender norms, but those are not the only moments in the pieces where ideas about gender are conveyed. In *Siegfried*, before he plays his horn call⁵, Siegfried hears a bird call in the forest. He seeks to understand it because a dwarf told him that one could learn to understand the language of birds, which he thinks he can do by mimicking the call on his horn, and he hopes it will tell him about

⁵ In this case, Siegfried’s horn is a silver hunting horn, but actual solo is played on a French horn.

his unknown mother. This explains why he wanted to play the call on his horn, but it also tells us more about how gender is represented in the work.

The bird call is portrayed by the flute, clarinet, and oboe: three instruments that are typically gendered female. It consists of many beautiful, quick, and somewhat random statements by the three different instrument groups, creating a natural and organic imitation of a bird. The bird's character is sung by a soprano, which is always a woman. The call's musical components suggest that femininity is related to beauty and peace. Underlying all of this is the suggestion that it is natural, that women by nature are peaceful, beautiful, and supporters of men. Throughout the second act, the bird guides Siegfried, but she never plays a more direct role. She always serves as an aide to Siegfried, our hero, our manly protagonist. This has strong implications for the "natural" power hierarchy of men and women. Men are at the top, possessing power and bravery, and women sit below them with beauty and guidance to help and please the men. While this is a simplistic frankly offensive view today, it captures the essence of this gendered idea which persists in our society, though it is increasingly being challenged. This is further reinforced by the ending of the story, where Siegfried finds a woman in the forest who falls in love with him and renounces the world of the gods to be with him. The story assumes that a woman would rather spend her life with a man than have power. I am not suggesting that there is anything wrong with a woman preferring love over power, merely that it is an expectation society has about what a woman should want.

In both *Siegfried* and *Scheherazade*, the antagonist is characterized by heavy brass, especially the trombone. The choice to portray the villain is not exclusive to these pieces, with one of the most famous examples being Star Wars' *Imperial March*. The choice to portray these antagonists with male-gendered instruments is an obvious one, given that the antagonists in all

three of these cases are male. However, it hints at the bias to view women as insignificant. For an antagonist to qualify for representation by sinister low brass motifs, they must pose a threat, but this breaks several societal norms. It would both require a woman to be powerful and to have ill intent, but these are traits typically reserved for men.

It is worth noting that both *Siegfried* and *Scheherazade* are old; they were written over a century ago. Most of the most popular jazz and classical pieces were written anywhere from fifty years to two centuries ago. Since then, gender norms and ideas have likely shifted, but the decreased popularity of the jazz and classical genres makes characterizing this change difficult. A notable missing element of this paper is how nonbinary and trans gender ideas work in music, but many of the studies done on instrument choice did not consider anything beyond binary gender, and the pieces of music considered were written long before ideas about nonconformity of gender were popular. Additionally, the way music affects an individual is highly dependent on their relationship with gender. One might find a piece of music to empower their gender expression while another might feel that it is overbearing and unrelatable. Still, the social norms and ideas surrounding gender were constructed very long ago, and today's norms and ideas must still be derived from those of a century ago. Understanding the relationship between music and gender in classical and jazz music is one piece of the foundation to understanding gender in modern popular music, which might be more representative of modern ideas.

This area of research is important for two primary reasons: it helps us to understand the mistreatment of musicians and it helps us to identify what underlying assumptions are made about gender. The mistreatment of musicians is an important topic in a society where arts are consumed en masse, but the financial compensation and general treatment of our artists are declining. Because so many people consume music daily, often without being critical of the

deeper implications, there is much potential for the underlying gendered ideas to be missed. By analyzing gender in music, we unlock the potential to address some of the most fundamental assumptions about gender in our society – so fundamental that they can be communicated without words. By recognizing these assumptions and mistreatment of musicians, we can begin to challenge how we approach music and music education to create a more inclusive and interesting environment for all.

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