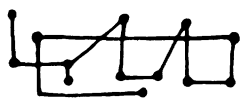




SOME THOUGHTS ON  
SUSAN MCCLARY'S  
*FEMININE ENDINGS*



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*FEMININE ENDINGS* MAY NOT BE all that we wish it to be. But its thrust is powerful, its stance sincere, and its appeal compelling and provocative. Those who disagree with the book's postulates may wonder why its perspective has had such an impact, perhaps a greater one than any other in recent decades, if national AMS meetings and the number of people who turned up at the recent conference, "Feminist Theory in Music," is an indication. Susan herself, not just her feminist perspective, generates much of what gives this work its strength. Hers is the position of an outsider, dismissed by musicology journals and ignored until recently by those controlling the discipline. But, unlike many mavericks, her knowledge and training are those of an insider (she has a Harvard Ph.D.). The original voice and independent spirit which have kept Susan far from the mainstream cannot be understood without acknowledging the thorough grounding she received in the traditional aspects of the discipline and her

deep commitment to understanding music. With the distance of an outsider then, she is willing to take risks, propose a vision unconstrained by personal and professional allegiances, fearlessly read music the way her feminist literary friends read literature. But it is her understanding of the premises and conventions of much seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century music and her desire to question them, together with her enormous courage and self-discipline, that force us to read her carefully, to take her seriously. While some of her claims may seem exaggerated, hers is a model for those of us reevaluating the questions we ask, the subject matter we address, the meanings we seek, for those trying to come to grips with traditions, conventions, and values that have lost their validity, for those seeking in music and their lives new and deeper significance.

*Feminine Endings* asks more questions than it answers; in fact, it is the questions, or what Ben Boretz calls the “question-spaces,” that interest me more than her conclusions. What is or might be the feminine in music? How is music a gendered discourse? What constitutes feminine pleasure and desire, especially as suggested by or manipulated in musical compositions? Why have male composers and theorists often associated the feminine with the exotic Other, madness, and excess, as opposed to reason? Who is speaking through women characters? Do they shed light on “how women really are” or are they instead “male fantasies of transgression dressed up as women,” an equally interesting issue especially when it comes to the avant-garde of any period? The territory upon which Susan casts her gaze is immense, apparently rich in Boretzian “discovery spaces.” My favorite part of the book is the introduction, a sketch of avenues to explore, a “provisional methodology” for a new discipline.

In many ways the book's central question—the “feminine” in music—is the most difficult. Perhaps hoping to avoid near-sightedness or prevent any accusation of essentialist reasoning—a feminist nightmare—Susan tends to avoid precise definitions and to assume the reader knows what “feminine,” “masculine,” and even “narrative” mean. Her method of inquiry is to pursue analytically in specific compositions certain themes associated with these terms. Foremost among them are power issues, the feminine here meaning on the one hand passive or submissive, and on the other, seductive by virtue of female sexuality. Her discussions make us rethink, among others, *Poppea* and *Carmen*, Beethoven and Tchaikovsky. Focusing on feminine sexuality has real appeal, especially after confronting “the contradictory impulses that have organized patriarchal culture since the Enlightenment” as articulated, for example, in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony whose “sexual message” Adrienne Rich reads as a “man in terror of impotence/. . . yelling at Joy from the tunnel of the ego/music without the ghost of another person in it.” Susan suggests what it might mean to explore and express feminine eros as an alternative to what she considers the phallus-driven need for climax and tension/release in much western music.

What might be a music without transgression, feminine containment and closure, music with a “sensual eroticism that involves openness or vulnerability”? This endeavor is important and revelatory, but problematic if one takes feminine to mean only a certain kind of sexuality, a certain relationship to (masculine) power. Fusing “models of the erotic” onto ideological discourses such as “rationality, power, and domination,” and vice versa, can only turn up certain kinds of information, even if one’s intent is deconstructive. If music can indeed “help to create and transmit [the world] by reinforcing as pleasurable (and as inevitable, as universal)” certain “habits of thought,” I would hope we could conceive of these “habits” in broader terms than the sexually erotic.

Susan’s analytical methodology itself presents us with another definition of “feminine,” the process of a woman seeking to read and understand music. For her, interest in a specific piece of music begins with love for it, not primarily intellectual fascination. Her goal is to understand how and why it *affects* her, and she trusts her reactions to be legitimate. In her quest, she never divorces her own perceptions nor the music itself from the “human contexts” that are responsible for them. All analysis begins with an individual insight, rather than an attempt to try out a hypothesis or demonstrate the usefulness of a technique or theory. “What usually motivates a project,” she writes, “is that an odd musical detail catches my attention.” “Dissatisfied with the implied contents of received artistic conventions and procedures”—like the women composers about whom she writes—Susan then turns to her “eclectic tool kit assembled over the years out of whatever has seemed handy in unlocking particular musical problems.” Whether it be through “extensive historical excavation,” musical, critical or cultural theories—“whatever [can] help [her] to make sense of the composition at hand”—she then proceeds, with “no sense of loyalty to any particular orthodox position.” Her relationship with works she analyzes is thus open to what they might suggest (rather than rationally predetermining what approach is best), trusting of her own reactions (rather than depending on the power of some analytical technique), not denying her own subjectivity, her own social construction, nor that of the music. What makes me think of these positions as something vaguely feminine is the extent to which they describe how I too approach music and musical inquiry, something for which I have sensed puzzlement from male students and colleagues.

Perhaps the most important contribution of *Feminine Endings* is the challenge it puts forth for women composers. Throughout the book, Susan encourages women to explore and give more voice to the feminine in themselves, to “make a difference inside the discourse itself,” to envision “narrative structures with feminine endings.” Her book tries to help women keep from “unwittingly reproducing ideologies” they may not

choose to reproduce. Get down off the beanstalk, she urges, “embark on a journey in search of alternative ways of organizing sound, ways that correspond more closely to [your] own values and experiences.” Unfortunately Susan does not address how very many men have challenged the “standard narrative of tonal striving, climax, and closure” in this century. Her analysis of Schönberg’s criticism is interesting—although his *Theory of Harmony* might be feminist were he to map his criticisms onto gender as she conceives it, he prefers instead to “align himself with the properly masculine business of revolution.” So much for changes made by men. Still, she rightly despairs of all the women composers whose works sound no different from that of their male counterparts; many even have a “strong distaste for the idea of permitting their identities as women to be apparent in their music.” The reasons for this are understandable, but the point is that only women can explore, problematize, and share insights from that which is their own unique domain. Perhaps today, in a postmodernist climate that celebrates difference, the time has come for a woman’s voice to be heard as the voice of a woman. How else are we to come to a better understanding of the feminine? It is arguably more of a balance between the feminine and masculine in us all that could save our culture from devouring self-interest, repression, and the desire to dominate.

*Feminine Endings* does not exhaust what feminine may mean in music. In concentrating on power and desire, this book shortchanges other feminine attributes—sociability, domesticity, and community—and what these might mean in music. It valorizes the public and the social implications of the analyses, but I miss that which can be wrenched from exploring the private and personal domain. Even in her discussion of eros, Susan does not go far enough. Eros is also a striving to be one, whole in a larger sense than merely the sexual; eros in music can express more than just the heroic individual, be it male or female. Both women and men today are creating musical models involving a larger sense of eros—mutual recognition and interaction, collective participation, not just power and desire. Perhaps a better title for such a book might be “Feminine Beginnings.” The rest of the story is still to be told.