

Gender and music – NOTES

Historical

- In western culture men have dominated the music profession – particularly as musicians.
- Before the 1850s most orchestras refused to employ women as it was thought improper for a woman to perform in public.
- Traditionally women were encouraged to play instruments such as harp or keyboard which were played as an accompaniment to the voice to entertain friends and family at home. They were discouraged from playing instruments such as drums, woodwind, brass as they were thought either too weak (lung strength) or it would spoil their appearance.

Opportunities

- Women were not given the same opportunities as men for music education and training.
- Few women were able to attain high levels of performance achievement.
- The lack of orchestral experience and education meant that women found it difficult to compose large-scale, complex works, which are associated with well-known respected male composers.
- Even if women did produce symphonies, concertos and operas they were rarely performed. Often the only way a woman could publish a composition was under a man's name.
- The actual instruments have also been gendered – where instruments such as drums or trumpets have been perceived as being more appropriate for males and instruments such as harps as being more appropriate for females.
- There are some musicians that challenge these stereotypes.

Today

- Today there are increasing numbers of women employed in professional orchestras and they play a wider range of instruments.
- Rarely, however, do they equal the number of male musicians.
- The number of women composers is increasing.
- There are roughly twice as many girls learning to play instruments as boys and girls achieve a higher percentage of passes than boys in music school examinations.
- Despite the increased opportunities, men continue to have more prominent role and often achieve higher levels of success in their music careers.

Preferences

There are discourses that are constructed through diverse outlets such as music critics, journalism, academia, education, music marketing or musical subcultures – and also social media, that might either challenge or reinforce gender associations with music genres, as well as with instruments. For example, a magazine called *Drummer* often portrayed male drummers throughout the magazine and on the front page.

Professional

- Only a small minority of women actually participate in professional musical activities
- Schools may also reproduce pre-existing musical gender divisions – or indeed challenge these, by encouraging boys and girls towards specific instruments. Hopefully this is no longer the case, but you can think about this for yourself.

Rock and the music industry

- Over the past 20 years, the analysis of gender and rock music began with the premise that rock is created and performed by men or that it exemplifies a masculinist culture.
- Notions of gender affect the everyday experiences of rock musicians within the context of the rock industry.

Gender in music industry

- Gender is produced and maintained by discourses, institutions and individuals operating in the music industry.
- Music industry includes individuals such as musicians, promoters, record company staff.
- Female-centred refers to bands that predominantly comprise female members who control the majority of the bands creative output.

Rock Music – gendered definitions

- Rock encompasses many sub genres E.g. heavy metal, punk, grunge, post-rock. Each has particular associated codes of conduct and display and each offers separate gendered responses.
- Rock music – tends to employ particular instruments – electric guitars, drums, electric bass and styles of performance, and song structure, but rock itself is difficult to define e.g. rock has also contained rough sound, blues, ballad melodies etc.
- Rock has developed over half a century and has resulted in a proliferation of experiments and sub genres e.g. death metal, industrial, post-rock.
- These sub genres are described in musicological terms as well as other codes of practice including performance style, associated fashions, record sleeve design, cultural practices of those who listen to and engage with them.

Rock music and gender

- It has been argued that rock music itself favours the creation and reproduction of certain gender identities and against the reproduction of others.
- Frith and McRobbie (1990) observe the music is loud, rhythmically insistent, the lyrics are assertive and arrogant
- Such analysis maps an understanding that loud and harsh guitar vocal sounds signify strength and potency and that these are associated with masculinity – do you agree that this is still the case?

Sexuality

- The work carried out by Queer studies scholar also question the assumption that rock should be interpreted as heterosexual.
- Performers such as Mick Jagger, Robert Plant – appeal to an aggressive form of heterosexuality.
- However, fans produce meanings rather than consume set images.
- A male performer may display a certain type of masculinity or sexual identity but the person listening to the records or attending the concert is active in making sense of that performance and may create a personal understanding of it that is at odds with the musician's original mention.

Indie

- The focus on indie music– allows for an in-depth discussion of music, performance and discursive practices within a specific frame of reference.
- Indie – sometimes referred to as alternative rock – has popularly been understood as being more open to female participation than other rock forms.
- Indie is not as associated with an overt masculinist agenda or hostility to female participation.
- Thus, different music genres carry with them distinct histories, performance practices and discourses (e.g. rap, grime, pop, soul, jazz etc.).
- These discourses affect how gender is constructed and experienced and of course you could focus on a particular sub-genre for the essay.

Performance

- Butler argues that gender does not exist as an ideal or as essence but is constituted from a series of performed acts that create the notion of gender.
- While gender appears to be a fact, it is a constructed that is treated culturally as if it were a fact.
- The role of pop singer or folk vocalist accompanied by an acoustic guitar can be viewed as tapping in to and reinforcing notions of femininity.
- Record company investment in female singer-songwriters and pop vocalists has encouraged women to view these roles as legitimate ways to break into the record industry.
- Female musicians who have departed from conventional feminine gender identities on stage have often been seen as subversive and more so for female than male musicians.

Music industry

- The music industry has often been referred to as macho or male with more males working in the industry overall.
- In some sectors of the industry does not explain why particular music genres are understood as male.
- Rock like all popular music, is not static - it is continually being performed, listened to and discussed.
- The creation of new songs, adoption of novel performance techniques, and introduction of unconventional instruments and technologies pushes at and stretches the defining boundaries.
- The masculinist character of rock practice is not just an inheritance but results from a process of reproduction and continual enactment by artists.

Artists:

- . Madonna it has been argued parodies female stereotypes and adopts her identity at will and highlights Butler's ideas of constructing her own identity beyond traditional gender binaries.
- She changes her persona (as does Kylie as well) and exposes femininity as a masquerade – playing roles – of gender.
- But others suggest that she is doing this for profit and it is superficial queerness that typifies Madonna.

Prince

- Prince also avoids anything that threatens his masculinity despite his appearance.
- He can be used to explore how performance pulls together issues of gender, ethnicity, sexuality and race.
- He does confront normative models of masculinity through his looks and mannerisms and dress (high heels).
- The female participants in his videos are given visual priority but Prince displays sexuality through his performances, especially heterosexuality.
- It could be argued though he is appealing to a polysemic gaze.

Bowie

- We could look at David Bowie as well in relation to sexuality and gender boundaries - although it could also be argued that this was also for publicity and to promote his music as in later life he has settled down to a more conventional lifestyle.

Other artists and possible essay topics

- There are many other contemporary artists that we could also look at in relation to gender and sexuality – such as Mykki Blanco – however if this is something you would like to write about, I am sure that you will have ideas about an artist that you could write about in relation to gender/sexuality.
- Examples of essay questions could be
- Does [name of artist] exemplify Butler's notion of gender trouble?
- Does [name of artist] exemplify queer theory?
- Does [name of artist] challenge stereotypes of masculinity and or femininity?
- Is [name of artist] highlighting fluid gender identity in their performances.