Music and Gender

Kathryn Alexander
University of Arizona, kalexander@arizona.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/wmt

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.25035/wmt.2024.001
Available at: https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/wmt/vol5/iss1/1

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License.
This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in World Music Textbook by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@BGSU.
Music and Gender
Kathryn Alexander | University of Arizona

Abstract: This chapter provides an overview of key concepts and terms for the study of music and gender.

Keywords: music notes, ethnomusicology

The online version of this chapter is available at https://worldmusictextbook.org/alexander-2024a. This includes video examples of the case studies mentioned here.

Gender: a state of experiencing (mis-)alignment with socially constructed roles, behaviors, expressions, and identities attached to categories of bodies delineated by a culture’s unique criteria. Gender may hinge on visible anatomy (sex), embodied practices, or other characteristics.

Introduction to Gender and Music

As an identity category, gender frames our experience of the world. Gender is one of the many overlapping, intersecting identities any individual person holds. But, while we can each define our own gender identity, our cultures have already set the parameters for which genders are possible, what those genders look like anatomically, and how those genders act socially. We can think of gender as something that is built by a culture, rather than a biological given that stems from anatomy, chromosomes, and hormones. That gender is culturally constructed means that the guidelines for how to embody maleness, for example, are culturally specific and mutable, or capable of changing. What maleness means, or how individuals identifying as male are expected to look and act in one culture, differs from how those identifying as male are recognizable in another culture. The meaning, definition, and experience of gender varies substantially and differs across time, geography, ideology, and cultural context.

Broadly, a culture’s gender system is used to organize bodies and behaviors into recognizable and clear categories. In Euro-American derived cultures, for example, gender has historically been understood as a binary: male and female. In a binary system, females are socially women who are expected to adhere to specific behaviors and mannerisms. They also partake in other social activities that are recognized by the larger society as distinguishing them as “women”—or separate from “men.” Euro-American society expects individuals to adhere to this binary system and creates incentives for individuals to
conform to these categories. The often-fulfilled cultural expectation that boys become men is a kind of normativity; in short, it is normal, expected, and routine. Cultures often have gendered expectations of musicians that are based on a culture’s ideas of which behaviors and sounds are appropriate for which gender. For example, there is a persistent association of gender with Western orchestral instruments, leading to the fact that boys more often play brass instruments, while girls are encouraged to play wind instruments (Eros 2008). But this is just one gender system, one set of cultural scripts, that assigns some social and cultural roles to one gender and different roles to the other. The following examples explore various ways that gender influences music and how music reveals a culture’s understandings of gender.

Case Study 1: Katajjaq

A variety of vocal games exist amongst the different Inuit communities across North America’s Arctic region. Katajjaq, a type of traditional sonic game, is an Inuit practice of Arctic Québec and the south of Baffin Island (Nattiez 2016). It features the sounds of the body, specifically the throat, which is why it is often referred to as “throat singing.” Of the many interpretive lenses through which we could examine katajjaq (including Indigenous sovereignty and settler colonial oppression), gender pertains here in that the vocal games are played almost exclusively by women. In this community, life and culture-sustaining tasks are often gendered male or female, and katajjaq provides an example of this. Two women, standing in close physical proximity and often holding each other by the arms, interlock their voices. The two singers create a specific pattern of intonation as they alternate their breathing in and out, using voiced and unvoiced breath to make sound while inhaling or exhaling. A single sound might be repeated as a motif (a small musical idea). This motif usually consists of low and high-pitched components. The game begins as the motif is slowly varied by the singer who initiated the sound. The second singer must copy her sound in response, and the game usually ends in someone out of breath or laughing.

Two practitioners of katajjaq, Karin and Kathy Kettler of the sister duo Nukariik, report that these were games women played while men were hunting (Anchorage Daily News 2014); Nattiez adds that boys also learn these games but traditionally stop participating when they are old enough to hunt with the adult men (2016). This suggests that the cultural expectations placed on differently gendered people can change as they reach adulthood. In this instance, a behavior formerly appropriate for boys does not typically coincide with the gendered expectations of them as men (see Singh 2002). It also suggests that gender identities and the social roles attached to them are, in this cultural context, clearly defined, and that participation in (or avoidance of) katajjaq permits adults to indicate their gender identity and their social roles.
Case Study 2: Hawai’ian Hula

Hawai’ian hula is a dance and vocal genre in which “gestures of the upper torso and limbs interpret the semantic content of poetic texts called mele.” Mele tell stories of places, deities, genealogies, and histories, and are vocally recited while the dance unfolds. “Mood and feeling [are] conveyed through facial expressions, eye contact and with the hands,” and the dance is performed to the accompaniment of rhythms played on a variety of percussive instruments (Smith, with Stillman 2001). While tourism promotion campaigns, film and television, novels and comics, and other popular media have cemented the idea that hula is performed by women, hula is also performed by men. However, several elements distinguish male from female hula, including the movement vocabulary, adornments, facial expressions, and the stories told through dance. The Euro-American settler colonial conception that dance was feminine eroded the position of male hula from the early nineteenth century; however, this belief ignores that fact that the first dancers arriving with voyagers from Polynesia to the Hawai’ian Islands were male. Indeed, male dancers (kāne) were primarily responsible for chronicling historical events and genealogies through hula in traditional Hawai’ian culture (Dimple 2024).

With colonial incursions into Hawai’i, European and Euro-American gender ideologies equating dance with femininity led to the belief that men who performed hula were effeminate. Equating dance with femininity is an example of how one culture imposed its own gender system onto another culture—in this case, Euro-American gender beliefs onto those of Native Hawai’ians (Kānaka Maoli). More troubling still is that this gender bias intersects with racial bias, serving to strengthen a racialized and gendered hierarchy that helped serve the interests of Euro-American colonizers at the expense of Native Hawai’ians. European and Euro-American men could thus be perceived as more “manly” than Hawai’ian men; in short, certain types of masculinity were more privileged than others. Intersectionality, meaning the compounding effects of identities in combination (see Crenshaw 1991), allows us to consider how privilege and its lack operate in fluid, but culturally-aligned ways: Though masculinity is usually privileged cross-culturally, here a particular kind of ethnic masculinity was diminished by Euro-American settlers as they enforced their own cultures’ gender expectations through religious, social, and economic structures.

We can think about these gender roles as “gender performativity,” another tool that can help us assess how gender operates in musical cultures. The idea that we each perform our gender suggests that we build our gender identity out of many signifiers that include mannerisms and clothing to present ourselves to the world on a daily basis. However, gender theorist Judith Butler uses “gender performativity” to mean something else. They suggest that when we perform our gender, that performance produces a series of effects (1990; 2011). Butler argues that we build our gender as we move through the world, and as we do so, others interact with, perceive, and make decisions about our gender. Sometimes these perceptions align with the gender we intend for oth-
ers to understand, but other times, there are misperceptions. Gender is not inherent and internal: We are producing it constantly in reference to our culture’s implicit and explicit rules about which genders are possible and what these genders look, sound, or act like. Gender, in short, does not exist outside of the cultural scripts, including music, that make it real and relevant.

**Discussion Questions**

1. What does gender mean to you? Where does this understanding come from?

2. How is gender a factor in musical communities with which you are involved? This might be as a performer or a consumer of music.

3. Make a list of how your gender identity impacts your lived experience (for example, think through an average day). Considering one of your other identities (such as your ethnic, national, religious, political, or generational identity), how does your gender identity operate in relationship to that identity?

**Recommended Reading/Media**


Works Cited


