

Women Composers Concerts + Feminist Pedagogy = ?

Elizabeth R Chen, bethchen@umich.edu
Math (PhD) + Women's Studies (Grad Certificate)

Framing Statement

We organized a series of nine collage concerts (2003-2007), where there was one and only one rule: "The music must be written by women!"

Q: How does your project integrate a feminist perspective and methodology into Music and Education?

Perhaps a better (rhetorical) question would be: "What *wasn't* feminist about our project?" These days, there are certainly many different cultural feminist events in general (eg: women's poetry readings, women's folk music festivals, women's art exhibits, the Vagina Monologues, etc). Many music schools and other music organizations (eg: Eastman School of Music, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, the International Alliance for Women in Music, etc) have organized Women in Music Festivals in particular. So the idea for Women Composers Concerts is not new. However, we were extremely self-reflective and strived to ensure that the entire process followed feminist principles, from start to finish.

There are definite parallels between various theories of feminism, operating procedures of feminist movements or groups, teaching styles in feminist classrooms, and organizations of feminist concerts. In my vision of the Women Composers Concerts, I drew inspiration from Feminist Pedagogy and the consciousness raising groups of Second Wave Feminism, which in turn derives from radical feminism. I was very lucky to have extremely feminist professors, who ran their Women's Studies seminars according to radical feminist notions of Feminist Pedagogy, and I used them as a model for organizing concerts. We created a safe space, both for the audience and performers at the performance venue, as well as for the musicians and volunteers at the organizing committees. We were very careful about avoiding replicating patriarchy. We were extremely democratic and encouraged everyone to have a voice. There was always a feeling of mutual support and sisterhood. Basically, we applied academic feminist theory and ideals to create real-life feminist activist events.

Q: How has this work been informed by your work in Women's Studies?

If I hadn't taken Women's Studies courses, I'm sure that I still would have tried to organize Women Composers Concerts. However, I might have followed a more traditional model, because I wouldn't have either the theoretical grounding to be aware of and avoid subtle issues of discrimination, or the requisite language to even articulate such ideas. It would just be a nagging feeling, an intuition that something feels wrong, but I wouldn't be able to verbalize exactly what. In this way, I would not have the strength of conviction or logical reasoning to convince either myself or convince others, that we should do things differently.

The "Theory of Feminisms" course was very useful for me, to sort out all the different types of feminisms, separate fact from fiction (ie: words we might have heard misused on the street), and put everything in their proper social/historical context. For me, learning to read feminist discourse was like learning a whole new language (very different from reading math textbooks). And the

theoretical grounding of feminist theory (especially the background of post-modernism) was like learning a whole new system of axioms and definitions.

I was very lucky to have five very interesting courses, taught by five very feminist teachers. Although it was only in the “Feminist Pedagogy” course, where we explicitly studied feminist pedagogy *per se* as the course material, it was quite an eye-opening experience for me to experience Feminist Pedagogy first-hand, in all of my graduate level seminars. (We studied how experiential learning is the best teacher, far more effective than simply reading a book about feminist pedagogical methods.)

In the “Psychology of Women” course, we studied the subtle ways women can face discrimination in organizations (eg: school, work, society), so I was aware of them and tried very carefully to avoid making those mistakes. In both courses, we studied how women professors who use a more “feminist” teaching style, receive lower teaching evaluations than those who use a more traditional (patriarchal) teaching style, so I was prepared to deal with the possible backlash of being perceived as a “weak” leader.

The “Women of Color” and “Global Feminisms” courses explored issues of race and ethnicity, for minority women both inside and outside the US. Although these issues didn’t really come up explicitly, they did arise subtly. Fortunately, I was definitely aware of these issues, and prepared to deal with them. eg: When performers (who were used to having various genres disparaged by the mainstream music community) asked if jazz and/or world music were acceptable in our “classical” music concerts, my response was an overwhelming “Yes, of course! Why wouldn’t they be?”

Q: What is the significance of your project to Music, Education, and Women’s Studies?

In the broader feminist community (or even in the Women’s Studies department), not everyone is familiar with Women in Music issues or Feminist Pedagogy. (Actually, it means different things to different types of feminists.) Both are mere specialties/electives, so it’s good to raise awareness among other feminists.

Even today, women’s music is still very marginalized in the mainstream music community. There are very few pieces by women composers in the standard repertoire (except possibly for pedal harp, which is a historically female-dominated instrument). Of course, there is gendering of both musical instruments and musical genres. Historically, women wrote smaller expressive pieces for the parlor, as opposed to large orchestral works for the formal concert hall. These days, there are many more Women Composers than before, and quite a few Feminist Musicologists, but we still have a lot of room for improvement. We have the numbers, but not much power. We still need to change the “old boys network” culture among music departments, ensembles, music publishers. And one thing we can do (although not the only thing) is to raise awareness of women in music issues, with the general public, music teachers, performers, everyone involved.

Also, the politics of music is still very patriarchal, both as an academic discipline and as a business model. Musicians blindly obey orders from authority figures (eg: music teachers/professors, orchestra conductors, opera impresarios) who decide how music is taught, which music is programmed, etc. In most disciplines, education is also still very traditional and patriarchal. When you talk about education or learning or intelligence, most people think of book learning, passively listening to a lecture. This is especially true in math and music theory. We need more empowerment of students/musicians, more democracy in classrooms and ensembles, orchestras, operas. Towards that goal, we present this project as an alternative model for others to emulate (or learn from our mistakes).