

THE ROLE OF GENDER IN MUSICAL PERCEPTION, PERFORMANCE, AND PRACTICE

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## The Role of Gender in Musical Perception, Performance, and Practice

The study on the effect of gender on musical practice has been a crucial topic for music psychologists in understanding the perception, performance, and practice of all musical praxes throughout history. In past studies, gender was found to be a statistically significant predictor of instrument choice, practice habits, emotional response, performance anxiety, style preferences, gender bias, and social perception. Because of the extremely large scope and varying factors regarding gender, most studies tend to find correlation between gender identity and opinions, preferences, and stereotypes regarding music. Others attempt to correlate specific aspects of musical performance with gender. Because gender is so closely linked to identity, social role, and behavior, much can be diverged from studying correlations between gender and music. This paper aims to provide a broad overview of the state of research done on gender and music, while making connections between past and present studies. This research will synthesize and analyze multiple studies and suggest further implications regarding the role of gender in the social, emotional, and cognitive musical development of both student and professional musicians, while noting statistically significant and changing trends in gender identity, gender role, and gender perception. These findings will hopefully provide music educators with a stronger understanding of gender and its role in music making, teaching, appreciation, processing, and practice, to better inform one's pedagogical strategy, philosophy, social organization, and expectation placed on students.

*Perception* of gender and music provides a starting point in understanding the sociological role of male/female hierarchies and beliefs on music. Gender is frequently attributed to instrument, musical genre, and preference, and has deeply rooted associations with sociological roles of masculine and feminine domains of thought. A study by Million, Perreault,

and Cramer in 2002 investigated gender stereotypes by asking college students to evaluate musicians playing traditionally masculine and feminine instruments. Their impressions were noted as masculine (dominant, leadership, activity), feminine (warm, sensitive, caring), or gender-neutral (adjustment, happiness, success) descriptors. The results showed that female musicians were actually perceived as more “masculine” than the male musicians, and musicians of feminine instruments were perceived as more caring, warm, and sensitive, but less dominant than those of masculine instruments. Most interestingly, males were judged equivalently for masculine instruments, but males playing feminine instruments were perceived as less dominant than females playing the same.<sup>1</sup> This study highlights the prevalent beliefs on instrument-object gender associations, and social/emotional associations with masculine and feminine behavior expectations. By attributing social roles and behaviors to inanimate objects of expression, those participating in music are constrained by the perceived role of each instrument, and perhaps become a medium for an expression of gender rather than an expression of the pure sound of an instrument. These beliefs on typically masculine traits like dominance and leadership are frequently perceived in instruments of greater volume, strength, and power, whereas instruments of a more delicate construction and requiring a softer touch are seen as warm, sensitive, and submissive. Not only are instruments gendered, but those performing on instruments that are typically associated with the opposite gender are judged as “less dominant”—especially in male hierarchies. These perceptions invariably affect the function of musical praxes around the globe—the choice to study a specific instrument is tied to an expression of gender and identity.

A study by North, Colley, and Hargreaves in 2003 investigated gender bias in students’ perceptions of male and female composers—students were asked to rate musical selections, and

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<sup>1</sup> Million, Perreault, and Cramer, “Perceptions of musicians: Gender stereotypes and social role theory,” *Psychology of Music* 30, no. 2 (2002): 164-174.

researchers noted which were male, and female, and noticed the trends. The results showed that gender-stereotyping was largely confined to jazz. In evaluations of ten jazz excerpts attributed to female composers, pro-female bias by female students and anti-female bias by male students existed. The study also found that attributes associated with traditional gender stereotypes were applied differently to the same music.<sup>2</sup> The importance of this study is found in studying perception—how the participants perception of gender expectations changed, and (2) how the stereotypes lost their meaning when only analyzing the music itself without visual context. This has interesting implications for visual / auditory processing in music, and how gender may be a primarily visual stimuli that affects each stereotype. The authors state that cultural factors and stereotypes, rather than talent, may have impeded past female composers from recognition. In order to encourage young people of both sexes to participate in jazz composition and performance, it is important to both maintain awareness of, and continue to investigate, gender-related issues which may impact perceptions of the music and most importantly, the desire to engage with it.

Similarly, a study by Millar in 2008 analyzed trends in musical preferences of young adults through a questionnaire. It explored gender differences in artist preferences by noticing their frequency and ratio of male to female. The study showed that gender bias (toward one's own gender) was stronger in males than in females. However, preferences were found to differ in preferred artist gender and genre regardless of gender.<sup>3</sup> This study further confirms research regarding gender bias in musical appreciation and preference, and that the males frequently prioritizes these same-sex gender biases over that of the females. However, Maidlow and Bruce

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<sup>2</sup> North, Colley, and Hargreaves, "Adolescents' perceptions of the music of male and female composers," *Psychology of Music* 31, no. 2 (2003): 129-154.

<sup>3</sup> Millar, "Selective Hearing: Gender bias in the music preferences of young adults," *Psychology of Music* 36, no. 4 (2008): 429-445.

in 1999 assessed and critiqued research under the “sex/gender paradox” in music—other possible influential factors that affect gender may be affecting this correlation. These factors include race/ethnicity, class and home circumstances, sexuality, disability, birth ordinal position and birth date, as well as brain lateralization.<sup>4</sup> The article concludes that psychologists researching this phenomenon should widen investigative spectra to acknowledge the environmental and situational contexts which people make music. This article provides important critique in the research, and opens up the possibility that any study on gender is largely inconclusive and insignificant unless other variables are included. Gender is an extremely broad category that can create a correlation/causation fallacy in musical perception without also introducing other important scientific, physiological, and psychological factors.

Following perception, the actual *performance* and preparation of music has been found to be affected by the physiological and psychological differences between genders. A study by Hallam in 2017 focused on correlations between gender and practice habits. A sample of 2027 girls and 1225 boys aged 6-19 were given a questionnaire, and the data was analyzed. The study found that there was no significant gender difference in weekly practice time and motivation, but there were significant differences in the adoption of systematic practice strategies (girls), perception of concentration (boys), and immediate error correction (girls). There were no significant gender differences in the organization of practice, use of recordings, use of metronome, use of analytic strategies, and adoption of ineffective practice strategies.<sup>5</sup> By analyzing the different successful and unsuccessful strategies that both boys and girls use while practicing at home, a correlation between gender and the psychological processes behind

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<sup>4</sup> Maidlow and Bruce, “The role of psychology research in understanding the Sex/Gender paradox in music,” *Psychology of Music* 27, no. 2 (1999): 147-158.

<sup>5</sup> Hallam et al., “Are there gender differences in instrumental music practice?,” *Psychology of Music* 45, no. 1 (2017): 116-130.

practicing was found. This article sheds light on the topic of practice, specifically applicable for music educators, and the sample provides interesting data on how both genders may differently practice, detect errors, and employ self-motivation.

Regarding the differences between genders in musical performance, a study by Ebie in 2004 attempted to determine gender's role in conveying the emotions of happiness, sadness, anger, and fear while singing musical passages under four treatment situations. The treatment methods were then analyzed in regard to their ability to teach emotional expression, and which would work better. The results showed that a significant interaction effect was found between males and females in their ability to convey anger, with females scoring significantly lower than males. Happiness and sadness were conveyed equally, and fear was difficult for both.<sup>6</sup>

Codifying the open and creative domain of "musical expression" into quantitative variables for study is very difficult and often inconclusive. However, studies on the natural similarities and differences of each gender in expressing identity through music continually proves the notion that males frequently prioritizes dominant behavior (such as the more successful expression of "anger").

A study by Ryan in 2004 analyzed musical performance anxiety among children, with a focus on gender differences. 6<sup>th</sup> grade students were monitored on heart rate and behavior at a piano recital after interviews and completing the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory for Children. The results showed that girls' heart rates rose before and during playing, while boys' heart rates rose minimally prior to performing but exceeded the girls' while performing. More anxious behaviors were displayed by boys both prior to and while performing.<sup>7</sup> It is possible that the

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<sup>6</sup> Ebie, "The effects of verbal, vocally modeled, kinesthetic, and audio-visual treatment conditions," *Psychology of Music* 32, no. 4 (2004): 405-417.

<sup>7</sup> Ryan, "Gender differences in children's experience of musical performance anxiety," *Psychology of Music* 32, no. 1 (2004): 89-103.

boys used physical activity as a coping mechanism to distract them from the impending performance situation, and that this physical activity also helped them to maintain the lower heart rates that were observed. These results are useful for making connections between the physiological and emotional processing of stress, preparation, performance, and anxiety. This research can be connected to other gender studies on music, and perhaps provide explanation for certain stereotypes and choices that correlate with gender in dealing with anxiety and performance tendencies. Educators should be aware of their students' anxiety, and observant of their young students' perceptions and feelings about performing. Acknowledgement of these perceptions and suggestions for coping with anxiety might help children to understand the normalcy and manageability of their feelings.

In the actual *practice* and organization of music programs, the role of gender clearly influences decisions on instrument choice for young musicians in the classroom. The practice of music is deeply tied to a child's initial decision on instrument choice, as it affects the daily learning and performance of music in any group of collaborating musicians. A study by Harrison and O'Neill in 2000 investigated the role of gender-stereotypic role models on children's instrument choice. Three groups of children received concerts with gender-consistent role models, gender-inconsistent role models, and no concert at all. The results showed a strong impact of providing a counter-stereotypical role model on earlier perceived preferences—girls expressed less preference for piano after observing a male musician playing the instrument, and boys ranked the guitar less favorably after they saw a female musician playing the guitar.<sup>8</sup> Children altering their gender perceptions and stereotypes after witnessing counterexamples of

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<sup>8</sup> Harrison and O'Neill, "Children's gender-typed preferences for musical instruments," *Psychology of Music* 28, no. 1 (2000): 81-97.

their biases shows how deeply these stereotypes are ingrained into culture purely based on anecdotal and sociological evidence, and perhaps not innate differences of gender. This study furthers earlier discussions on perceptions of instrument and their associated genders by providing a solution—the simple variable of demonstration (by male and female musicians). Gender stereotypes and associations to masculine and feminine personality traits stem from observation of shared social behaviors; by providing counterexamples, these perceptions are seemingly more liberal.

A study by Shibazaki in 2002 again explored the relationship between instrument choice and gender associations. However, it furthered the research by also analyzing musical style. Participants aged 3-4 years old took part in a musical matching game, involving 14 excerpts with photographs of individuals who might play the instrument in each excerpt. The results suggested that gender stereotypes for some instruments do appear to exist in young children, whereas in other instruments, gender associations are linked more to the musical style in which they are represented and possibly their performance contexts.<sup>9</sup> The implications of gender associations existing in very young children is unique to this study—in other studies, it was assumed that gender constructs were not innate and formed through experience, whereas this study seems to find that they exist before children even have significant social exposure to gender associations in music. Musical *practice* is affected deeply by the decisions children and adults make in selecting a lifelong instrument of expression, rooted in past and present *perceptions* on gender and social role.

The inseparable link between *gender identity* and *musician* creates many separated associations to expected personality, social perception, musical taste, and behavior. Perception

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<sup>9</sup> Shibazaki and Marshall, “Instrument, gender and musical style associations in young children,” *Psychology of Music* 40, no. 4 (2012): 494-507.



of gender-associations with musical instruments, styles, and artists show a distinct and common divide between masculine and feminine domains. These perceptions lead to attitudes in musical practice that creates stereotypes that permeate popular culture—from the home, to the media, to the concert hall, to the classroom. Gender biases and expectations have created a larger collective culture to which an expected identity is formed for masculine and feminine domain, based in psychological and physiological factors that shape musical opinion. Beyond a study on perception, gender predicts a significant difference in actual performance. Physiological and emotional differences exist between male and female responses to concert preparation, performance anxiety, and musical expressiveness. As musicians, educators, and students, understanding these perceptions and associated behaviors provides a deeper understanding of the social praxes surrounding music. Research has shown that gender perceptions can be altered based on simple recognition of gender differences; by providing examples that demonstrate musicians outside of expected gender norms. Through recognizing these perceived differences of gender in music, performance and practice can constructively develop to increased awareness, open discussion, and understanding of identity to reach a greater freedom of expression for all musicians.

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