

Listening to the Unspoken, Listening for the Unspeakable: Gender's Impact on the Musicianship of Female Improvisers Écouter l'inexprimé, entendre l'inexprimable : l'impact de l'identité sexuelle dans la carrière musicienne des femmes improvisatrices

Tracey Nicholls

Volume 11, numéro 1-2, mars 2010

Éthique, droit et musique
Ethics, Law and Music

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1054021ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1054021ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Société québécoise de recherche en musique

ISSN

1480-1132 (imprimé)

1929-7394 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Nicholls, T. (2010). Listening to the Unspoken, Listening for the Unspeakable: Gender's Impact on the Musicianship of Female Improvisers. *Les Cahiers de la Société québécoise de recherche en musique*, 11(1-2), 31-37.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1054021ar>

Résumé de l'article

Cet article explore dans quelle mesure quelqu'un peut participer à une communauté sans avoir à sacrifier les aspects de son identité, et cela à travers l'étude des relations que les femmes musiciennes des ensembles musicaux d'improvisation entretiennent avec leur identité sexuelle. Je me concentre sur les visions exprimées lors d'entrevues réalisées dans un cadre particulier, soit une table ronde organisée en tant que partie d'une conférence sur les communautés d'improvisation. Cet événement mérite une attention particulière puisqu'il a précisément été organisé dans le but de discuter dans quelle mesure l'identité sexuelle est un obstacle, un sujet que les panélistes ont décidé de ne pas traiter publiquement. Je regarde leur résistance à l'identification sexuelle et formule des questions à propos des conséquences existantes ou non à obtenir du succès dans ce monde de la musique improvisée lorsqu'elles s'identifient comme femmes, voire comme féministes. Aussi, dans quelle mesure peut-on comprendre leurs refus en tant que peur ou en tant que résistance de principe à une différence qui leur importe finalement peu.

Introduction

Is it possible to be part of a community without having to distort or misrepresent one's sense of identity? This general question of social participation on one's own terms is one that I explore here by examining assumptions that are made about, and made by, female musicians who perform improvised music. More narrowly, I consider various possible relations that these female musicians might have to feminism. My initial assumption, when I began my doctoral research into how community among musical improvisers is constituted and maintained, was that most, if not all, female improvising musicians would identify themselves as feminists; improvised music communities tend to be male-dominated¹ and I believed that women who had successfully inserted themselves into these communities would be inclined to publicly support a doctrine that defends the equal rights of men and women to participate in activities and communities of their choice.²

This assumption was tested, and refuted, by a roundtable discussion organized for the McGill University *Project on Improvisation's* 2004 conference, "New Perspectives on Improvisation".³ The roundtable brought together talented improvisers from across North America, and asked them to share their thoughts on why they improvise, what dangers or challenges they confront in choosing to do so, and what issues they see themselves dealing with in improvisation. They were invited because the *Project on Improvisation* was interested in giving voice to the experience of women in improvised music but, because of the discomfort the issue raised in the lunch-time planning discussion, gender was not foregrounded in the roundtable later that evening. In fact, initial references to 'women improvisers' provoked such reactions in the planning lunch that, for the most part, gender was only mentioned in the roundtable discussion as "that other thing we're not going to talk about". Thus, the question of how gender identity might relate to the improvising projects of these women could only be addressed implicitly. While it is possible that this reluctance to speak of gender—a phenomenon I shall discuss as a potential instance of 'gender hypersensitivity'—is just an idiosyncrasy exhibited by these particular women, I want to hypoth-

Listening to the Unspoken, Listening for the Unspeakable: Gender's Impact on the Musicianship of Female Improvisers

Tracey Nicholls
(Lewis University/CRÉUM)

esize a couple of possible motivations for the studious avoidance of gender which characterized most of the roundtable contributions.

As I use the term, 'gender hypersensitivity' is characterized by an excessive concern with possible implications of gender identifications, to the point of resisting (talk of) identifications.⁴ There is a real question here about the extent to which sensitivity becomes 'hyper' sensitivity, and the extent to which concern is excessive. As we shall see, one of the recurrent themes of the roundtable was an awareness on the part of all of the performers that to label themselves is, or can be, a way of limiting their creativity. Thus, one of my hypotheses will explain their silence on gender as 'hypersensitivity' and the other will gloss it as a deliberate rhetorical strategy. In order to demonstrate the broader relevance of this resistance to labeling, which might otherwise be seen as just an isolated incident at a small, local conference, I supplement my discussion of the roundtable with theoretical analyses of women in music and the so-called 'gender problem' of women's limited contributions to the arts.

The Roundtable: Resisting Gender Identification

First, let me introduce the roundtable participants and sketch the format of the discussion. The event took place on May 26, 2004, in the early evening, at Sala Rosa on boulevard St-Laurent (in downtown Montréal). It was moderated by Ellen Waterman, a University of Guelph music professor and improvising musician, and Julie Smith, director of education for Vancouver's Coastal Jazz and Blues Society.

¹ In their anthology *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, editors Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker observe that "jazz history and criticism has been couched in the language of nation, race, and masculinity" (2008, 16). They are not alone in identifying jazz as a male-dominated world; a co-written chapter in Ajay Heble's history of improvisation in North America, *Landing On The Wrong Note: Jazz, Dissonance, and Critical Practice*, also characterizes jazz and improvising circles as "discursively constructed [to be] a male preserve" ("Nice Work If You Can Get It" 2000, 146).

² I came to this question of identifying oneself as feminist with a set of initial assumptions that I thought were uncontroversial: (1) that feminism is simply the doctrine of equal worth—and therefore equal rights—of men and women, and; (2) that feminism is a social movement for positive change which all who believe in this doctrine of equal worth should be inclined to support, publicly. Having spent the last few years

teaching in the American Midwest, I have since been made aware that the feminist label, if not the ideal of gender equality, can provoke considerable controversy. I first discovered this in a moment of culture shock with my first introduction to philosophy class, in which only three students—very hesitantly—responded affirmatively to the question of whether they considered themselves feminists. (Just to give you a sense of classroom demographics, I should add here that roughly three-quarters of this class of thirty students were young women.) My initial fear that I had stumbled into a pocket of 1950s conservatism forgotten by time was, however, dissipated by the discussion that followed: all of the students, without exception, endorsed ideas of equal rights and equal treatment and it became clear to me that their initial resistance was to the label, the word itself—feminism. This experience prompted me to rethink some of the conclusions I had formed of the roundtable discussion which is the basis of this paper.

³ I was, at the time, the graduate research assistant for the *Project on Improvisation* and, in that capacity, I was responsible for organizing the planning discussion that preceded the roundtable event and for transcribing the recording that was made of the roundtable. All of the comments I attribute to these improvisers in this paper come from that transcription.

⁴ Typically, this phrase is used in public discourse, along with related phrases like ‘racial hypersensitivity’, to denote a political orthodoxy that is usually folded into a larger category called ‘political correctness’. It tends to be a disparaging phrase, suggesting that the complaints one might make that about how one is treated are being dishonestly attributed to gender when that poor treatment is bet-

They were drawing out, for the audience, what they termed the ‘enormous’ knowledge trust of six very talented performers. Contributing to that knowledge trust were local musicians Lori Freedman and Diane Labrosse, two improvisers and composers who help make Montréal’s new music scene so vibrant and exciting. Joining Lori and Dianne were Pauline Oliveros, renowned founder of deep listening; Ione, a spoken-word improviser, artistic director of the Pauline Oliveros Foundation, and curator of the gallery at Deep Listening Space; New York-based jazz saxophonist Matana Roberts; and Los Angeles-based pianist Dana Reason. Matana brought to the discussion a history of having been musically educated within the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (the AACM) in Chicago. On her side, Dana contributed the expertise on women in improvising music communities that she developed during her doctoral studies in University of California at San Diego’s Critical Studies/Experimental Practices program in the Department of Music (replaced now by the graduate program Integrative Studies). These six women all shared their thoughts on three main questions posed by the moderators—what does it mean to identify yourself as an improviser? is improvisation dangerous? and what kind of issues do you consider important in improvisation right now?—and then took questions from the floor.

The clearest moment of resistance to gender identification occurred in Lori Freedman’s response to the first question, what it meant to her to identify herself as an improviser. She began by saying that she had never thought about how to identify herself, prompting the moderators to clarify the question. Ellen Waterman reminded her that, in the lunchtime planning session, “we were talking before about all the other things we didn’t want to necessarily identify ourselves *as*, because every identification puts you in some box...” and reassured her that “we’re not talking about *that other thing*.”⁵ Although it may not have been obvious to members of the audience, this was a direct reference to the opinion, expressed during the lunch, that the label ‘women improvisers’ implied a lesser, or second class, segment of the overall population of improvising musicians.

While Freedman was, of these roundtable participants, the most openly resistant to discussing herself as a *female* improviser, she is certainly not the only member of the group who sees the danger of the stereotypes that women confront as musicians. Pauline

Oliveros recognizes that people’s stereotypes are triggered by her response to the question of what instrument she plays. Describing the accordion she plays as “an outlaw instrument”, she says that “stereotypes come forward and kill the conversation; this is actually the essence of many problems in our society in terms of gender and race, that kind of stereotypical thinking” (1993, 374-375). Critic Timothy Taylor analyzes Oliveros’ career as a composer as “an attempt to define and then to shed the established norms of contemporary composition, which she sees as overwhelmingly male” (1993, 385), even though she, like Freedman, rejects gendered labels.

Improvisation theorist and organizer of the Guelph Jazz Festival, Ajay Heble, encountered the same phenomenon in 1997 when his annual festival chose the theme “Women in Jazz”: “[S]ome of the women artists who performed at our festival that year expressed a very similar concern, wanting to be seen as musicians period, not ghettoized as *women performing artists*” (2000, 163), he recalled. The gender bias that is challenged in this resistance to labels is pervasive in discussions of art and music, and it was this very bias that the organizers of the roundtable had attempted to foreground. Paradoxically, though, the women who were invited to articulate this marginalized perspective chose to deny the necessity of its expression.

Individually-motivated Resistance: Evading Gender Identification

To understand why it might have been so important to contest gender identification, we can turn to scholarly studies of this widespread gender bias, in particular, Susan McClary’s feminist musicology and Linda Nochlin’s historical approach to the question, usually posed rhetorically and dismissively, of why there are no great women artists. McClary’s book *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (1991) explores how music constructs notions of gender and sexuality, and offers an account of discursive strategies that female musicians have employed in order to make space for themselves as musicians. Nochlin (1998) takes a slightly different approach to the issue of gender and creativity; beginning from a feminist perspective and working towards an analysis of artistic production, she surveys strategies that feminists have employed in order to rehabilitate the generally low assessment of female artistry.

McClary observes that, while ‘gender’ is in fact a characteristic of both men and women, discussion of gender’s relation to music is almost exclusively raised only by the presence of female musicians (1991, xv). Men, it would seem, are the ‘natural’ producers of music, and only deviation from that presumed naturalness demands acknowledgement. McClary also notes that modernism, most particularly in its avant-garde practices, implicitly cements its claim to masculinity by casting both the Romanticism and the mass culture that it opposes as feminine. With this association between masculinity and avant-garde music-making established, the experimentalism of improvised music becomes more ‘naturally’ a male pursuit, whereas improvisation by female musicians becomes a difference to be questioned and potentially delegitimized (1991, 17).⁶ This delegitimization follows the social semiotics of identifying the mind as male and the body as female: this can be seen, for instance, in the relegation of women in jazz to vocalicity, making music using only their bodies, while men perform the role of minds manipulating the machines that are their instruments (1991, xvii).⁷

The primary strategy that female composers and performers have used, McClary tells us, is exactly the move I encountered in the planning discussion for the roundtable: they have challenged the perception of their incompetence to write and compose “first-rate music” (1991, 19) by de-emphasizing their gender identities. This is an important political position in McClary’s view because it allows the individual musician to contest her own prospective marginalization. By not owning or making an issue of that aspect of her identity that is her gender, the female musician deflects essentialist assumptions about what ‘women’s music’ *ought* to sound like. The downside of this strategy is that the stereotype about women’s ‘natural’ style of music-making—“pretty yet trivial” (1991, 19)—remains in force and that these musicians are still at risk of being marginalized simply by third-party reminders of their gender. This, I would venture, is exactly the concern that motivated resistance to an explicit discussion of gender issues in the roundtable. For this reason, McClary favours a posture which calls the conventions of musical discourse to account, one which demands that space be made for difference within the discourse itself.

Gender-based essentialization of musical production is not the only barrier to full acceptance of female musicianship: McClary

(1991, 18) also identifies as problems the institutional roadblocks that Nochlin (1998, 316) foregrounds in her analysis, notably denial of entry into schools and training venues and limitations on professional connections. Closing doors to, and foreclosing opportunities for women who might desire careers in the arts was not, however, an accidental or contingent development in Western history. Nochlin argues that the social organization which constrained women’s creativity derives from what she calls “the myth of the Great Artist” (1998, 317). From the earliest Greek myths about lowly shepherd boys accidentally revealing unexpected talents in drawing and music to the self-conscious ascription of god-like powers that Romantic literary critics, calling on the original meaning of the Greek word *poesis*, claimed for poetry, the stories that are told about artistic achievement all stress its “apparently miraculous, non-determined, and antisocial nature” (1998, 317-318; see also Abrams 1953, 282-285). Because women are deemed essentially passive in contrast to the active/creative nature of men, it is clear that women cannot be gods, that they do not have the power to bring forth the worlds in which great artworks reside.⁸ On the view of the world that this mythology of artistry presents to us, women lack “the golden nugget of artistic genius” (Nochlin 1998, 319). And if they lack this mysterious quality that only seems to appear in men, then surely society is justified in not wasting on them the educational and professional resources which refine artistic genius? In naturalizing the very skills that institutions foster, this myth obscures the sexism that tries, first, to keep women out of artistic circles. If this does not work and a few particularly persistent women happen to force their way in, then sexism demands, as the price of their second-tier places in the artworld, that they relinquish unconstrained expression of their gender identity.

One may well argue that this analysis is outdated and that institutional impediments no longer apply. And it is true that women are no longer prevented from applying to music schools or choosing careers as musicians. But, I would argue, there is still reason to believe that the sexism which justified those historical barriers continues to exist, just as intractable and pervasive as before, for all that it might now be a covert force. My basis for believing this is the phenomenon that I have been analyzing: the female musician’s reluctance to speak her gender identity and her career identity in the same context. Listening to the

ter explained by one’s own personal defects (or perhaps, is not really poor treatment at all). I think that despite its popular connotations the phrase can be useful in helping us to see a set of cases in which people who seem to be over-reacting to an innocuous situation are in fact reacting appropriately given their experiences of the context. My use of the term therefore constitutes an act of reclamation.

- 5 Lori Freedman’s response to the first question posed by Ellen Waterman and Julie Smith was transcribed as follows:
 LF: I never thought about how to identify myself; what’s the question again?
 EW: What does it *mean* to identify yourself as an improviser?
 LF: What does it *mean*?
 JS: [indistinct]... maybe that’s an assumption...
 EW: Because we were talking before about all the other things we didn’t want to necessarily identify ourselves *as*, because every identification puts you in some box...
 LF: Ok, then we won’t talk about *that*?
 EW: So we’re not talking about *that other thing*, right?
 (Freedman et al. 2004).

- 6 There is, when one thinks about it, something particularly curious about this ascription of masculinity to improvisatory practices. One of the things that marks a good improviser is the ability to listen and respond to his or her improvising partners. Such responsiveness within social interaction is coded as feminine in almost every other aspect of society, yet here it is the essence of masculinity. This odd inconsistency does not go unnoticed by Heble and Siddall; they quite provocatively ask

whether it might not be the case that “jazz—with its predilection for what Charles Keil calls ‘participatory discrepancies’, its fascination with dissonances and nontempered sounds, its exhilarant use of irregular rhythms and altered chord structures—by its very nature (and despite the marginalization of women) [could] be seen as a style of music that revalues and makes central to musical composition and performance what has traditionally been constructed and dismissed as the feminine in music?” (2000, 145-146).

7 This is a point also made by Heble and Siddall who note that “women in all Western musical genres, including jazz, have been discouraged from playing instruments socially understood to be unfeminine” and that this “gendering of instruments has limited and defined women’s roles as jazz musicians” (2000, 148 and 150).

8 This marginalizing view of women’s artistry is expressed in improvising communities as a belief that female jazz performers are simply not capable of fulfilling expectations of innovation and political resistance that both black male musicians and white audiences have of improvisation (see Heble and Siddall 2000, 151). If improvisation is fundamentally innovative and women lack those capacities, then clearly women cannot be improvisers.

9 Dana Reason responded to the second question (whether or not improvisation is dangerous) by saying, “with improvisation, for me personally, it’s about trying to articulate a voice, *have* a voice, and particularly in the United States at this moment, it seems sometimes inadvisable to have a voice if you want to just kind of stay, down there. I’m a permanent resident so I feel like sometimes I need to watch what I might be saying, or who I might be speak-

ing and interpreting that unspoken as the unspeakable, points us to the ethical issue I alluded to in my introduction, failure on the part of the community to allow every member the freedom to participate on his or her own terms without distortion or constraint of one’s identity. The gender hypersensitivity that I defined earlier would, on this interpretation, be born out of a fear of delegitimization or a sense that repression is a condition of continued membership.

This concern about being an outsider within the putatively masculine world of music-making is analogous to worries that Dana Reason expressed about being a permanent resident but non-citizen in the United States and being active in experimental music communities.⁹ She speaks of a perceived need to censor her thoughts and to constrain her behaviour in order to maintain her status in the community, as if one cannot be resident in and critical of the United States at the same time—just as the female musician perceives the need to de-emphasize her gender if she is to be accepted as a ‘real’ musician.

Reason, Oliveros, and Freedman are not alone in their concerns about being cast aside; Ingrid Monson, another improvising musician and academic theorist of improvisation (currently Quincy Jones Professor of African American Music at Harvard University), recalls a sexist pattern in her early life as a trumpet player: “Although individual men (especially teachers) were often very supportive, one’s ability on the instrument could not guarantee acceptance in or access to the broader fraternity of trumpet players. There was something about being a woman that was disqualifying” (2008, 270). After years of trying to earn her way into musical communities by being good enough, and hoping that people would tolerate her gender because of her talent, Monson recalls finally realizing that reactions to her gender were not really about her—that is, they were not something for which she needed to be, or could be, responsible. They were other people’s assumptions and categorizations, and as much as one might try to undermine or contest those assumptions, “you are not going to be able to stop people from making [them]” (2008, 280).

This awareness that one cannot control the assumptions of others can be liberating—it seems to have been for Monson—but it can also reinforce one’s hesitancy to make an issue out of the thing that people are making assumptions about. In the case of a feminist

defence, that one’s gender is irrelevant to one’s decision to pursue a career as a professional musician, one invites judgments from one’s peers and audiences on two levels—as a woman and as a feminist—, and in both cases negative perceptions that already permeate the community give a female improviser good reasons to believe that the judgments will be unflattering. This is not just a matter of seeking approval; a female musician who is perceived as difficult may well find that her male ensemble members no longer want to perform with her and this could jeopardize her career.¹⁰

Politically-motivated Resistance: Rejecting Gender Identification

There is, however, another possible interpretation of resistance to gender labelling, one that only occurred to me after reflecting on the distinction between ideologies and their labels that these improvisers and my students were all insisting on. It may be that the unspoken becomes the unspeakable, not out of fear, but out of a strategic commitment to gender eliminativism.¹¹ That is, the silence on gender identity may be, not a fear or an excessive concern about being fully oneself within this community, but instead a principled refusal to speak an identification that ought not matter. The clearest philosophical endorsement I have encountered of eliminativism of both race and gender labels was presented at a 2005 McGill Philosophy Department Workshop on “Philosophical Conceptions of Sexual Difference and Embodiment”. The presentation in question was given by Laurie Schrage of California State Polytechnic University at Pomona. Her argument, in essence, was that our identifications of people as belonging to a particular sex or race are based on their having physical characteristics (genitalia, skin colour, hair texture, etc.) that are regarded as sexed or raced, precisely because these characteristics are most frequently found in those classed as belonging to said sex or race—that is, our conceptions are logically circular (2005, 7 and 10). And while we might take ‘man’ and ‘woman’ to be different from each other because of their distinct reproductive functions, Schrage observes that “sexual generation is only one of many things we do with our bodies, and isn’t the whole truth about our bodies, despite its evolutionary importance” (2005, 12).

Rather than challenging, and thereby risking reinscription of, what she calls “questionable classificatory systems” (2005, 14), Schrage advocates that we just stop using them. As to

what, exactly, we should stop doing, she draws our attention to gender-specific pronouns and descriptions (like, ‘the woman sitting next to me at lunch’), and to gender designations on official documents like passports. Practically speaking, we may not have the freedom to decide which parts of official forms we want to fill out; the government can respond to our refusals to provide arbitrarily-demanded information by withholding the documents or licenses we seek. But we do have the freedom to be more creative in our descriptions—so, for instance, ‘the intellectual property specialist sitting next to me at lunch’—and to be more resistant to imposed identifications that we perceive as irrelevant. That might have been the case in the consensus of our roundtable’s planning lunch that discussion should be organized around what it means to be an improviser rather than what it means to be a woman improviser. As Lone notes, though, the drawback of a refusal to accept a label which we might find limiting is that we often need to use more words in our efforts to present ourselves to someone intelligibly.¹²

The real downside, as I see it, is that eliminating gender terminology from musical discourses could silence analyses of and challenges to gender oppression. If we choose not to speak of women improvisers, how effective can we be in critiquing and rehabilitating their marginalized status in musical communities? This was the essence of my objection to Schrage’s proposal when I commented on her paper at the embodiment workshop: I support the long-term goal of eliminativism but I worry that, in the short term, leaving unspoken the difference upon which we discriminate will make it impossible for us to combat the discrimination. Schrage thinks that this objection is overstating the issue, and that we can sensibly, usefully make a distinction between the language in which we speak the social realities of racism and sexism and the language with which we perpetuate race and sex as essential characteristics (of persons, and of categories). We can, she thinks, move away from a shuffling of people into ontological categories while still allowing us to “track what we acknowledge to exist—the discriminatory and hostile effects that still accompany the recognition of differences that we attribute to race and sex” (2005, 21-22). I think she is right here, insofar as this is what we *should* be doing. But I find my concern over her general proposal, that we may lose the ability to talk about racism and sexism if we stop talking about race and sex, heightened when I consider the

applicability of eliminativism to this particular situation that I present here. Simply put, we cannot fully interrogate gender bias in musical communities if we leave gender identifications unspoken.

This view is endorsed by new scholarship in jazz studies, notably the anthology produced by Nichole Rustin and Sherrie Tucker, *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies* (2008). Rustin and Tucker note much of the feminist history of women in jazz and improvising communities has focused on instrumentalists determined to prove that the “difference” of their gender did not matter, that they could “play like a man” (2008, 24).¹³ By contrast, their anthology directs attention to how jazz culture and musical improvisation have been shaped by gender (2008, 2).¹⁴ Gender, they declare, is “not just... a peripheral, extra, or ‘special interest’ subtopic in jazz studies” (2008, 1), but is part of the complex relations that each improvising musician must navigate in each moment of the musical creation for which they are all jointly responsible. Indeed, their thesis is even stronger than the one I am advancing in this paper. For Rustin and Tucker, it is not just gender bias that cannot be interrogated if we ignore the gendered aspect of identities; there are a whole host of relationships among musicians, and between musicians and audiences that cannot adequately be theorized if we do not speak of gender.

Conclusion

Thus, my conclusion about the impact of gender on musicianship is that it demands of the marginalized gender, women, either an acceptance of the discourse that presents women’s artistry as second-class or a deliberate politicization of their artistry. That is, each woman who claims a place in a musical community faces a forced choice between denying part of self-identity (her gender), so that her artistic contributions will not be marginalized, and becoming an agent of change, in this case, feminist change. This politicization is the possibility that McClary (1991, 19) was identifying when she observed that she saw the most hope for inclusive musical communities in the work of women artists who insist on speaking their difference, on demanding that the discourses expand to accommodate their voices.

It is also something that Dana Reason identified as an issue of concern to her as a musician: while silence on one’s gender may deflect one’s own potential marginalization, it encourages what she calls the ‘myth of absence’, that

king a sort of politics to” (Freedman, Reason et al. 2004).

¹⁰ Heble and Siddall give force to this fear in their description of the 1997 Guelph Jazz Festival. Its theme, “Women in Jazz”, proved controversial because, as they explain it, “some of our long-term sponsors became anxious about associating themselves with what they perceived to be ‘a feminist’ and thus, in their minds, a highly political and exclusionary event” (2000, 160). The Guelph Jazz Festival is a longstanding and widely-respected annual event on the Canadian improvised music scene and it could afford to stand by its principles in the face of skittish sponsors. Many improvising performers, on the other hand, simply do not have that kind of financial autonomy.

¹¹ ‘Eliminativism’ is a term that is used in philosophical discourse to denote any theory that denies the existence of a particular thing. Although eliminativist philosophical theories have a long history (for instance, Descartes’ *Meditations* begin with an eliminativist hypothesis that the external world does not exist), this kind of philosophical move gained currency with the ‘eliminative materialism’ argued for by Paul and Patricia Churchland in the 1980s. The Churchlands argue that our common-sense beliefs about psychology—that we have mental states like beliefs and emotions—are wrong and that this primitive ‘folk psychology’ will eventually be replaced with a sophisticated neuroscience which explains our behaviours in terms of brain states (instead of supposing the existence of a fic-

tional entity like 'mind') (see the entry "Eliminative Materialism" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* for a more detailed history).

More recently, some progressive philosophers in critical race and gender studies (e.g. Naomi Zack, Robert Bernasconi, etc.) have advanced the thesis that 'race' and 'gender' are fictional, or non-existent, and need to be replaced if we are ever to move past racism and sexism. My discussion in this paper presents the version of gender eliminativism that is expressed by Laurie Shrage (2005), professor of philosophy at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona.

¹² Ione said: "Well, let's see. I don't think that I do identify myself as an improviser; I would not use that term because it has its own limitations. So I've tried to use as few limiting terms about myself as possible. But that means that I also have to use a lot of words sometimes to say what I'm doing" (Freedman, Ione et al. 2004).

¹³ Heble and Siddall make the same point through quotation of famous female pianist Mary Lou Williams, who says: "You've got to play, that's all. They don't think of you as a woman if you can really play" (2000, 154). By implication, then, if a performer insists on her womanhood, she raises doubts about her ability.

¹⁴ This new direction in jazz studies is something that Heble and Siddall were calling for eight years earlier as a corrective to what they described as "the surprisingly undertheorized issue of women in jazz" (2000, 141).

¹⁵ When asked why there were so few women organizers, Dana Reason explained: "Well, I spent quite a bit of time kind of addressing that topic and I see that sort of as what I call 'the myth of absence' because there are a lot of women improvisers. For my own research, you

female musicians are simply not present.¹⁵ Reflecting on her experiences within improvising communities, Reason speculates that this silence extends further than gender issues. While recognizing the social forces that have contributed to the silencing of musicians, she wonders if "perhaps it has been a certain unwillingness on the part of practitioners themselves to speak up and out for improvised music traditions that have placed these musics at the margins of twentieth-century music and music education".¹⁶ Reason notes, however, that her belief that "'talking music' play[s] an important role in advancing vital information about the art of improvisational practices" has caused discomfort among some of her improvising partners, most of whom are male. As she carefully reminds us, though, it would be a mistake to simply and hastily reduce this reticence to speaking about music to a manly desire to avoid discussion of feelings. In the same way, it would be a mistake to assume that all female musicians who deflect gender identifications are doing so out of a gender hypersensitivity or a politicized desire to render such labels obsolete. There are many complicated reasons for resisting imposed identifications and many shades of ambiguity in our relationships to the labels that imperfectly and inadequately define us.

In the final analysis we must take note of the fact that, as feminist musicology of the kind McClary helped establish and feminist jazz histories¹⁷ amply demonstrate, women are present, and ethically sensitive musical communities have an obligation to alter their discourses and assumptions to accommodate this reality. Listening for the unspoken, encouraging it to speak, and listening to the diversity it is articulating are all actions that will encourage musical communities to evolve into more pluralistic cultures, capable of valuing and theorizing the complex relations of their members. ◀

REFERENCE LIST

ABRAMS, M.H. (1953). *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, London, Oxford University Press.

"Eliminative Materialism" (2003/2007). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu>, accessed on internet October 21, 2009.

FREEDMAN, Lori, IONE, Dana REASON, Julie SMITH, Ellen WATERMAN et al. (2004). «New

Perspectives on Improvisation», roundtable conference, Sala Rosa, Montreal, May 26.

HEBLE, Ajay and Gillian SIDDALL (2000). "Nice Work If You Can Get It", *Landing On The Wrong Note: Jazz, Dissonance, and Critical Practice*, New York, Routledge, p. 141-165.

MCCLARY, Susan (1991). *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

MONSON, Ingrid (2008). "Fitting the Part", Nichole T. RUSTIN and Sherrie TUCKER (eds.), *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, Durham (NC), Duke University Press, p. 267-287.

NICHOLLS, Tracey (2006). "Following Haiti's Lead: Radical Possibilities for De-Ontologizing Race and Gender", "Mapping Feminist Scholarship/Tracer les études féministes", Montréal, McGill University, June 9.

_____ (2005). "Commentary on Laurie Shrage's 'Is Female to Male as Black is to White?: Sex and Miscibility'", "Workshop on Philosophical Conceptions of Sexual Difference and of Embodiment", Montréal, McGill University, March 12.

NOCHLIN, Linda (1998). "Why Are There No Great Women Artists?", Carolyn KORSMEYER (ed.), *Aesthetics: The Big Questions*, Malden (MA), Blackwell, p. 314-323. Originally published in *ARTNews*, January 1971, p. 22-39 and p. 67-71.

OLIVEROS, Pauline (1993). "Cues", *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 77, N° 3, p. 373-383.

REASON, Dana (2009). "Building Stronger Improvising Communities", *The Improvisor*, www.the-improvisor.com/bsicfr.html, accessed on internet October 21, 2009.

RUSTIN, Nichole T. and Sherrie TUCKER (eds.) (2008). "Introduction", *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, Durham (NC), Duke University Press, p. 1-28.

SCHRAGE, Laurie (2005). "Is Female to Male as Black is to White?: Sex and Miscibility", "Workshop on Philosophical Conceptions Of Sexual Difference And Of Embodiment", Montréal, McGill University, March 12.

TAYLOR, Timothy D. (1993). "The Gendered Construction of the Musical Self: The Music of Pauline Oliveros", *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 77, N° 3, p. 385-396.

TUCKER, Sherrie (2000). *Swing Shift: "All-Girl" Bands of the 1940s*, Durham (NC), Duke University Press.

know, I had to narrow down over a hundred names of women that I knew ... down to eighteen. And we all know that there's a multiplicity of experiences that each of those women have, so they're going to be addressing ... power in their own right. But to, the larger community of improvisers— do we know of those women's works? You know, I feel that it's important, as a woman improviser, to address ... the power structure within the community itself, where more women's voices would be heard ...” (Freedman, Reason et al. 2004).

¹⁶ Dana Reason, “Building Stronger Improvising Communities,” *The Improvisor* available at www.the-improvisor.com/bsicfr.html.

¹⁷ See, for example, Sherrie Tucker's book *Swing Shift: "All-Girl" Bands of the 1940s* (2000).