

From normativity to performance: A review of gender studies in ethnomusicology

Federica Banfi
PhD candidate, Queen's University Belfast

Abstract:

This essay critically engages with the way ethnomusicology is approaching gender issues. It will start by looking at how Ellen Koskoff and Judith Butler influenced the discipline with their focus on performance and sexuality.

Then, through ethnographic examples, I will explore the two main approaches ethnomusicologists have taken when it comes to the study of gender in music making. The aim is to show what are the limitations and possibilities offered by each. The first approach understands gendered musical performance as something that reinforces normative gender behaviour, and assesses how this influences individuals' gender identity construction. In this approach, gender categories look somewhat fixed and homogenous. Examples considered will include: Veronica Doubleday's overview of musical instruments and gender (2008), Eduardo Archetti's analysis of the poetics of Argentine tango lyrics from which a specific masculinity emerges (1999), and studies on rap masculinities and femininities by Cheryl Keyes (2006) and Annette Saddik (2003). The second approach focuses on occasions where musical performance challenges preconceived gender roles. Such studies bring power struggles to the fore and give us a sense of

gender as process. These will be the examples considered: Chloë Alaghband-Zadeh's study of the characteristics of North Indian vocal music (2015), and Pablo Vila's and Pablo Séman's ethnography of cumbia in Argentina (2011).

Introduction: gender studies and ethnomusicology

Nettl identifies two leading discourses that have influenced the increase of attention to gender in ethnomusicology:

“One is the recognition that the understanding of gender as a factor in personal identity, and of gender relations in all aspect of society, is essential to the interpretation of musical cultures; and this is closely related to the second, the realization that virtually all relationships, and all developments in music, among societies, and of groups of people within a society, can be seen as a function and expression of power relationships.” (Nettl 2005, 404)

The author recognizes that gender studies play a vital role in ethnomusicology's aim to understanding musical cultures, and that gender relations can give us insight on wider social dynamics of power. Washabaug goes as far as stating that “the history of popular music could be portrayed as a margino-centric struggle, a contest between the power-wielding bourgeois men at the social centre and the powerless bohemian women on the margins” (1998, 9). In this view, gender struggle is also connected to class struggle.

Nettl outlines the main phases of gender studies in the discipline of ethnomusicology: at first, up to the mid-80s, women scholars tried to fight the double male bias, that is men

studying men, and balance the record by focusing solely on women making music. In fact, feminist scholars concluded that the little presence of women's music on record “had more to do with class, status, and power than with the art and culture” (Bernstein 2003, 5). A second phase developed in the late 80s, when women's study was placed in a broader context and scholars started to look at relationships between ‘genders’. Finally, since the early 90s, the discipline has seen a broadening of gender studies to include gay and lesbian identities, and the use of theories coming from other fields to “understand the links between social and musical structures from gendered perspectives” (Nettl 2005, 409).

The importance of studying gender in ethnomusicology has been increasingly recognised in the past decades. But how has gender been studied in the discipline? To understand the impact of gender studies in ethnomusicology, I will first look at how Koskoff and Butler influenced the discipline. Secondly, presenting ethnographic examples, I intend to show how gender studies in ethnomusicology range from an essentialist approach to gender as a somewhat static category related to personal identity, to a processual approach seeing gender as a performance in which power dynamics between different genders are displayed. Finally, the article will reflect on what each approach affords to the study of gender within the context of musical performance.

Koskoff's and Butler's impact on the discipline

Since the 1980s, influenced by feminist anthropology, ethnomusicologists started looking at the effect gender had on music making and at how music influenced the cultural construction of gender (Bernstein 2003, 6). In 1987, Koskoff

set the agenda for the study of gender in ethnomusicology by defining two main questions: “First, to what degree does a society's gender ideology and resulting gender-related behaviours affect its musical thought in practice? And second, how does music function in society to reflect or affect inter-gender relations?” (1987, 1). Koskoff underlines the role of gender ideology in defining women's role in music. Starting from the assumption that “in most societies, a woman's identity is believed to be embedded in her sexuality” (ibid, 6), this would affect their music performance in three ways: performance could symbolize sexual relations; alterations in women's sexuality due to age could result in changing roles in music making; cultural beliefs about sexuality might result in taboo or the segregation of women's music (ibid). Crucially, Koskoff pays attention to the relevance of musical performance as a form of power struggle and negotiation between genders. She lists four categories of inter-gender music performance: those that confirm the status quo; performances that maintain norms only in appearance; performances that challenge but maintain the status quo; and those that challenge and threaten the norm (ibid, 10). In this light, music making is conceived both as a way to reinforce discourses and as an activity where power struggles are played out and where the potential of social change lies: “whether performing informally or formally, on stage or in ritual, participants and audiences can variously perpetuate or contest meanings and feelings [through music]” (Magowan and Wrazen 2013, 4).

Only three years after Koskoff's writings, Judith Butler proposes to see gender as entirely performative. Her philosophical reasoning understands gendered acts, gestures

and desires as inscribed on the surface of the body, so that gender does not pertain to the essence of the person, but it rather is a “*fabrication* manufactured and sustained through other discursive means” (2006[1990], 185). In that sense, musical performance can be a prime terrain for the observation and analysis of gender behaviours. Indeed, Washabaug states that “musical performances are cultural lightning rods that have the power to reveal in condensed form the forces that are elsewhere diffuse” (1998, 5). Magowan and Wrazen argue that “music making is a means of disciplining mind and body through gendered experiences, representations, and significations” (2013, 3). As a result, ethno-musicology is in a privileged position when it comes to analysing gender performance in music to understand wider gender power relationships.

Ethnomusicologists have two main approaches when it comes to the study of gender. The first centers on gendered musical performance as something that reveals normative ideas and behaviours connected to gender, and how these influence an individual's gender identity construction. In this case, gender categories are somewhat fixed and homogenous, their relationship with other genders is often not included in the discussion. The second group of studies, instead, focuses their attention to what happens when different genders come together in music making. They bring to the fore power struggles and give us a sense of gender categories as processes. In the following sections I will present some case studies from both approaches to assess their potential and limitations.

Framing gender categories

Studies approaching gender categories as somewhat fixed, have looked at the difference between men and women in music making in terms of access – who plays what, when and where – and at how music helps constructing gender categories by setting what is the acceptable behaviour. An example is Doubleday’s overview of musical instruments and gender (2008). In her study, the author identifies several elements that influence the construction of gendered meaning connected to musical instruments. These range from spiritual beings and origin myths, to the physical shape and sexual symbolism of the instruments (2008, 7-12). These elements would help identify an instrument as female or male. Such categorization has consequences in determining who is allowed to play what. For instance, a male instrument might only be accessible to men and taboo for women (2008, 14). Cross-gender relationships between instrument and player are possible, but the author notices how it is far more common for a male musician to play a female instrument, rather than the opposite (ibid, 15). Doubleday underlines how “the realm of musical instruments remains clearly male-dominated” (ibid), with the effect that musicians are naturally conceived as men while women's role in music remains marginal, being relegated to vocalist or dancer roles (ibid, 17). Such strong association of men with instruments often results in taboos against women touching certain instruments. Doubleday looks extensively at the relationship between gender and musical instruments in terms of access to music making, explaining why women's role in music appears to be marginal cross-culturally through generalizations. Even though the study pays little attention to processes of gender identity construction and

power struggles in music, it offers a solid starting point to further question these issues.

Similarly, Archetti's analysis of the poetics of tango lyrics allows for gendered categories to emerge from old songs. The author introduces the social and historical setting of tango in the 1920s Buenos Aires as "a period of creation and renewal when a set of moral rules and beliefs was contravened symbolically and, perhaps with less intensity, in practice" (1999, 133). In this decade, Argentina was aiming at becoming an international industrial power and was encouraging and subsidising immigration (Washabaug 1998, 17). Although acknowledging that this period brought about a change in behaviour in both men and women (*ibid.*), what Archetti exposes are fixed, homogenous categories of ideal masculinity and femininity. He describes the *milonguita*, as it appears in tango lyrics: a young lady that challenges the notion of the good woman and works in the cabaret, dancing and entertaining men for money (*ibid.*, 139-40). Gender relationships are depicted as difficult: men are often the victims of evil women who abandon them (*ibid.*, 145). Two masculinities emerge from tango: one kind of songs "portray a sad man remembering his lost happiness" (*ibid.*), a man that accepts the woman's choice and wishes her well, showing to be morally superior. Another kind of songs depict the fierce *compadrito*, a man living a rebellious life, denying the legitimacy of the judicial system, a man that is alone and needs no one (*ibid.*, 142). These songs focus on the themes of male honour and women's betrayal. The man in these songs often punishes the woman by death (*ibid.*, 154-5). What tango finally depicts is a doubting masculinity at the mercy of independent women. According to Archetti there are no signs

of *machismo* in tango lyrics (*ibid.*, 157). Washabaug similarly concludes that "tango is all about men suffering from love, sweeping up women in order to comfort and protect themselves, using them as crutches" (1998, 19).

Archetti's study is important for the understanding of the poetics of tango, though due to its focus on lyrics it lacks the comparison between idealized tango masculinities and real Argentinian ones. Washabaug describes tango dancing as "a site of significant gender performance... [in which] boundaries dividing male and female are continually being breached and tested" (1998, 20), as such it may represent an avenue to further Archetti's study.

Keyes and Saddik use a similar approach to the study of masculinities and femininities in rap music. Both authors only focus on one gender authoring clear descriptions of different gender identities and in what ways these are performed. Saddik's study analyses male *gangsta* masculinity in rap as a theatrical performance (2003, 110) that rejects mainstream white values and the double standards of American values when it comes to race (*ibid.*, 114). The mainstream ideal of the American dream is that one should obtain power and wealth but not be ostentatious (*ibid.*). However, black men are often excluded from obtaining wealth, therefore when rappers show off their success they do it to criticize and oppose "elitist cultural display codes" (*ibid.*). The ideal masculinity of rappers sees pride and arrogance as necessary qualities for black men to be successful in American society (*ibid.*, 122). The author successfully shows how *gangsta* rap culture is a product of the social circumstances and culture these men live in.

In a parallel way, through a focus on female rappers, Keyes demonstrates that women's role in rap is not as marginal as it is often perceived (2006, 97). She does so by identifying four categories of women rappers, or four kind of femininities in rap, namely: the intelligent 'queen mother' associated with African culture, the independent and erotic 'fly girl', the aggressive 'sista with attitude' that knows and gets what she wants, and, finally the feminist 'lesbian'. Embracing one or more traits of these identities, allows black women to empower themselves in a male-dominated world (ibid., 105-6). Keyes presents examples from each category and is aware that female rappers can construct their own personal identity by mixing traits from each of these categories. It would be interesting to put Keyes' and Saddik's articles in conversation and bring their findings further, for instance by analysing how female rappers are perceived by male rappers and audiences and vice versa, or what influence the industry has on rappers' performance of femininity and masculinity.

These studies show how gender identities are a product of cultural norms, exposing fixed gender categories to which individuals either belong or not. What is missing is a focus on the process of how gender is negotiated through performance, the becoming of men and women, and what happens when opposite genders meet.

Gender as processual

The following examples engage in showing how gender is constructed and negotiated through inter-gender encounters. What emerges from these studies is that gender is constantly negotiated by individuals strategizing whenever they must confront with another gender. Alaghband-Zadeh (2015)

examines elements and categories of song within North Indian vocal music. She starts by analysing each local vocal genre and dividing them between classical and masculine, and semi-classical and feminine (2015, 352). Apparently, not only the more masculine genres have a higher status than the feminine, but they are also stylistically different by lacking ornamentation and improvisation (ibid., 354). Secondly, inspired by Butler's theory of gender performativity, she underlines how "audible signs of gender are just as powerful as visible ones" (ibid., 361). As such, since music-making is always embodied, the performance of certain gendered vocal styles contributes to the construction of the gendered body (ibid., 365). More interestingly, she considers the strategic negotiations female singer Subhra Guha undertakes when performing. The performer is aware of discourses about what is the appropriate genre for a woman to sing, and of the social pressure to respect such norms, pressures coming both from her teacher and music critics. At the same time, Guha uses a variety of strategies, both musical and discursive, to be able to mix female and male characteristics in her music to raise her status (ibid., 368). The processes of negotiation of gender categories become apparent in the strategies implemented by musicians like Guha. These musicians "artfully negotiate with conventional understandings of the music they perform, in search of prestige and professional success" (ibid., 375-6). This article not only exposes wider processes of gendered power relationships but also brings forward the personal experience of artists that struggle against the norm while constructing their personal gender identity.

Vila's and Séman's ethnography of cumbia in Argentina looks at processes of gender negotiation through musical

performance by looking at what happens when men and women confront each other directly in dance. Cumbia has become very popular among younger generations of low-income Argentinians and is, therefore the perfect locus for studying how gender relations have changed in the last twenty years (2011, 2). They contrast the lyrics of the songs, portraying forward women of loose morality, with two cumbia dance styles: the first is the *cumbia romántica* which is danced by couples holding hands and a choreography similar to salsa. It is characterised by a sharp movement of the hips and the man leading. The second style is the *menaito*, in which women dance alone and move their pelvis in a provocative and sexualized way (ibid., 3).

The authors support the thesis that the sexist lyrics of cumbia are a product of the troubled gender relationships of modern Argentina. The taboo on sexual practices has been eroded, as such these have become more visible and are considered as a source of pleasure. Throughout the introduction, the authors describe the social changes in attitudes towards sex that have led to a more open and active female sexuality, which is perceived by men as threatening, leading to an uncertain masculinity. Such uncertainty calls for the necessity of finding new models of masculinity, and cumbia is just one example of how men try to deal with a new kind of gender relations (ibid., 18). What is more interesting though, is that the authors go beyond the analysis of the social circumstances of cumbia to interrogate how men and women perceive cumbia lyrics. On the one hand, men consider cumbia as representing women as they actually are, but also state that women have become more sexually active since cumbia depicts them as such. On the other hand, women enjoy their

sexual freedom but dislike the way they are portrayed in the lyrics (ibid., 2). Vila and Semán are aware that musical performance is the perfect scene to investigate 'an ever-changing and sexual terrain that is rife with ambiguity' (ibid., 21).

The diverse case studies in this section show how music making is not only a locus in which gender categories are crystallized and performed but also how they are constantly negotiated in various situations, especially when different genders come together.

Conclusion

This essay has tried to demonstrate the advantages and limitations of the two main approaches to gender studies in ethnomusicology. The gender agenda has seen three main phases: the first developed from the feminist intent of the 1970s of setting the record straight in the literature by demonstrating that women make music too and getting rid of the double male bias. The second phase, set out by Koskoff, “ask[s] how concepts of gender constrain and shape music making and how music making serves as vehicle for the construction of gender” (Diamond and Moisala 2000, 2). The third phase extends to include the study of identities beyond the male-female gender construction binary. The role of the ethnomusicologist is to uncover and interpret *genderings* in music to understand the wider dynamics of power. Music serves “social identificational functions” (Washabaug 1998, 24), but it does so in an ever-changing flux, therefore scholars of the discipline need to be able to capture such processes. Furthermore, Wong has reported the absence of sex in ethnomusicology (2015, 181), and creates a manifesto for the

study of erotics in the discipline, inviting scholars to pay more attention to both what is said and what remains untold about sexuality (ibid., 184). In her opinion, ethnomusicologists have concentrated mostly on women and queerness, forgetting to talk about heteronormativity (ibid., 181). Although not represented in this essay, ethnomusicology has also given abundant attention to queer studies (Conner and Sparks 2004, Graper 2016, Hawkins 2015, Roy 2015 to name a few), alongside the study of masculinities and femininities.

Gender studies in ethnomusicology have shown a great potential in contributing to the understanding of gender processes and dynamics. On the one hand, we have ethnographies that treat gender categories as somewhat fixed and homogenous, while other studies look more directly at processes of negotiation of such gender categories, theorising gender as a fluid concept and including sexuality and the encounter between different genders. While the first approach allows to understand gender difference and permits cross-cultural comparison, the second approach is useful in its attempt to capture experiences and processes: “music making is (...) not just about being male or female but it is also about *becoming* men and women” (emphasis added, Magowan and Wrazen 2013, 2), or any other gender. Both approaches can help the discipline capture the nuances of gender identity formation and performance and comment on how these reflect wider societal dynamics.

References

Alaghband-Zadeh, Chloe. 2015. Sonic performativity: Analysing gender in North Indian classical vocal music. *Ethnomusicology Forum* 24 (3): 349-379.

Archetti, Eduardo P. 1999. *Masculinities: Football, polo and the tango in Argentina*. Oxford: Berg.

Bernstein, Janet. A. 2003. Introduction on women and music. In J. A. Bernstein (ed.) *Women's voices across musical worlds*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Butler, Judith. 2006 [1990]. *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York/London: Routledge.

Conner, Randy P.L., and Sparks, David. 2014. *Queering Creole spiritual traditions: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender participation in African-inspired traditions in the Americas*. New York/London: Routledge.

Diamond, Beverly and Moisala, Pirkko. 2000. Introduction. Music and gender: Negotiating shifting worlds. In: P. Moisala and B. Diamond (eds.) *Music and gender*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Doubleday, Veronica. 2008. Sounds of power: An overview of musical instruments and gender. *Ethnomusicology Forum* 17 (1): 3-39.

Graper, Julianne. 2016. Fiesta de diez pesos: Music and gay identity in special period Cuba by Moshe Morad (review). *Latin American Music Review* 37 (1):121-122.

Hawkins, S. (2015). *Queerness in pop music*. New York: Routledge.

Keyes, Cheryl. 2006. Empowering self, making choices, creating spaces: black female identity via rap music performance. In: J. C.

Post (ed.) *Ethnomusicology: a contemporary reader*. New York: Routledge.

Koskoff, Ellen. 1987. An introduction to women, music, and culture. In: E. Koskoff (ed.) *Women and music in cross-cultural perspective*. New York: Greenwood Press.

Koskoff, Ellen. 2005. (Left out in) Left (the field): The effects of post-postmodern scholarship on feminist and gender studies in musicology and ethnomusicology, 1990-2000. *Women and Music* 9: 90-98.

Magowan, Fiona, and Wrazen, Louise. 2013. Introduction: Musical intersections, embodiments, and emplacements'. In: F. Magowan and L. Wrazen (eds.), *Performing gender, place and emotion in music (...)*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press.

Navarrine, Julio. 1927. *A la luz del candil*. Original lyrics and anonymous translation available at: http://www.umich.edu/~matc/translations/a_la_luz_del_candil.pdf. Accessed 18 April 2016.

Nettl, Bruno. 2005. *The study of ethnomusicology: Thirty-one issues and concepts*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Roy, Jeff. 2015. The “dancing queens”: Negotiating Hijra Pehchān from India’s streets onto the global stage. *Ethnomusicology Review* 20

Saddik, Anette J. 2003. Rap's unruly body: The postmodern performance of Black male identity on the American stage'. *TDR* 47 (4): 110-127.

Vila, Pablo and Séman Pablo. 2011. *Troubling gender: Youth and cumbia in Argentina's music scene*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Washabaug, William. 1998. Introduction: Music, dance, and the politics of passion. In W. Washabaug (ed.) *The passion of music and dance*. Oxford and New York: Berg.

Wong, Deborah. 2015. Ethnomusicology without erotics. *Women and Music* 19: 178-185.