

# A La Recherche d'une Musique Féminine

## Christoph Cox

A few years ago, a colleague and I began teaching a course on avant garde and experimental music since the 1950s. Midway through the semester, a student confronted us about the lack of music and writing by women on our syllabus. My feminist credentials assailed, I went on the defensive. I pointed to Pauline Oliveros, Maryanne Amacher, Sachiko M and (very few) others as evidence that she was wrong. At the same time, I deferred the blame, explaining that, like it or not, there are simply precious few women in vanguard music and its theory and criticism. Even as the words left my mouth, I recognised that my response was inadequate, an embarrassing example of what Freud called "kettle logic". ("First, I never borrowed the kettle from you at all; secondly, it had a hole in it already when you gave it to me; and thirdly, I returned it to you undamaged.")<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. VIII (London: Hogarth Press, 1960), p. 62.

The next year, as a kind of belated gesture of reparation and re-education, I organised a *Women in Experimental Music Microfestival* that presented performances by Oliveros, Kim Gordon, Ikue Mori, and Marina Rosenfeld, and opened with a set by pianist Sarah Cahill, who played newly-commissioned pieces by Annea Lockwood, Julia Wolfe, Maggi Payne and others. Between acts, the performers gathered on stage for a discussion of the role of women in music today. The conversation ranged widely, from an acknowledgment of neglected ancestors such as Ruth Crawford Seeger to a celebration of Le Tigre's sonic and sexual radicalism. Each of the participants affirmed the importance of encouraging artistic exploration by girls and women; and several talked about their experiences leading or performing in all-women ensembles. Yet there was a striking ambivalence about the strategy of gender exclusivity in musical production and promotion. While celebrating the virtues of female solidarity and advocacy, the participants expressed a wariness about ghettoisation and about gender segregation as an effective feminist strategy.

This same ambivalence emerges among the participants in Her Noise. For the most part, these artists see the all-woman exhibition not as an ideal model but as a strategic necessity. Hayley Newman affirms the way the exhibition puts a spotlight on gender, highlighting and questioning the "uncritical acceptance of male dominance in experimental music". Emma Hedditch agrees, noting that Her Noise also uncovers the history of gender (and other) exclusions in modern music and

art. And Christina Kubisch sees the exhibition as a way of celebrating the “very original interest and taste” of women artists while sidelining the persistent competition with men that has so often marked the production and reception of work by women. Kaffe Matthews, however, offers an opposing view. Though she leads the all-woman quartet The Lappetites, Matthews questions the value and necessity of all-woman exhibitions. Such contexts, she insists, only “flag up the fact that there are so few women out there making sound work” and she doubts that these sorts of exhibitions will “inspire other women to get on with it”. “A few women showing within a group of men,” Matthews concludes, “could be more powerful in that matter.”

These discussions and disagreements reanimate an important debate in the history of feminist theory and practice: the debate between ‘egalitarian feminists’ and ‘difference feminists’. The women’s movement was founded by activists who campaigned for equal rights and recognition: women’s suffrage, equal pay for equal work and the acceptance of women as equal to men in intelligence and ability. While granting that such a feminist vision had made valuable political and economic gains, alternative feminist positions criticised the struggle for equality as an effort to achieve a male-defined and masculine norm. Hence, there emerged activists and scholars for whom the project of feminism was the resistance to homogenisation and the discovery and cultivation of a female specificity, whether natural and essential or historical and contingent.

Separatists and essentialists took Woman to be a category biologically and metaphysically distinct from Man. Difference feminists rejected such biological or ontological separation and, instead, viewed sexual difference as a contingent psycho-social fact that nevertheless marks male and female experience as saliently different. Among difference feminists, theorists such as Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray searched for an *écriture féminine*; a uniquely female mode of writing characterised by a joy in the materiality of language, multiplicity of voice and linguistic register, and a fluidity and duration that resists closure and remains in *media res*.<sup>2</sup> Each of these theorists has clarified that, while identified with women, such writing is not a given but an achievement. And they have insisted that the empirical sex of the author is not determinant. “Most women,” writes Cixous, “do someone else’s – man’s – writing [...] and conversely, the fact that a piece of writing is signed with a man’s name does not in itself exclude femininity. It’s rare, but you can sometimes find femininity in writings signed by men: it does happen.”<sup>3</sup>

2 See, for example, Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken, 1981), pp. 245–64 and “Castration or Decapitation?,” trans. Annette Kuhn, *Signs* 7:1 (1981): 41–55; Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), and Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

3 Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation?” p. 52.

4 Dan Graham, "New Wave Rock and the Feminine," *Rock My Religion: Writings and Art Projects 1965-1990*, ed Brian Wallis (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 116-137. Simon Reynolds and Joy Press take up some of these themes in *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock 'n' Roll* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

5 Graham, "New Wave Rock and the Feminine," p. 123.

6 Graham, "New Wave Rock and the Feminine," pp. 116, 130-32.

Is there a *musique féminine*, a noise that can rightly be claimed as *hers*? Artist and theorist Dan Graham grapples with this question in an important essay from 1981. Titled "New Wave Rock And The Feminine"<sup>4</sup>, the essay examines a range of positions that have been available to, and strategies that have been taken up by, women in pop and rock since the 1960s. Graham quickly dismisses what he takes to be a set of problematic or unsuccessful positions: woman as passive spectacle in girl groups such as The Shangri-Las; the male identification of 'macha' bands such as The Runaways; and Debby Harry's ironised femininity in Blondie. After pausing to admire Patti Smith's androgynous command of male and female passions, Graham reaches the heart of his essay: an analysis of sexual difference and female specificity in an array of all-woman or woman-led outfits: The Slits, The Raincoats, Ut, Kleenex, Teenage Jesus And The Jerks, The Bush Tetras and The Au Pairs.

It is precisely the theoretical matrix of 'difference feminism' that allows Graham to distinguish these groups as offering a critical feminist perspective, a *musique féminine*. Drawing on the heterodox psychoanalytic framework that informs the writing of Cixous and Kristeva, Graham locates the feminine in a kind of return of the repressed: in a resurgence of the primary drives that have been foreclosed by entrance into symbolic language, the establishment of a stable ego and the regulation of sexual desire. Never integrated fully into the symbolic order, argue Cixous and Kristeva, women have privileged access to these primary drives. For Graham, this resurgence finds its musical manifestation in extreme expressions of the female voice: the "hysterical pitch" of Lydia Lunch, the "indistinguishable babble" of The Raincoats, the "sibilant insertions" of Kleenex, etc.<sup>5</sup>

More generally, Graham discerns this female specificity in music that is "plurivocal, heterogeneous and polymorphous". Such characteristics, he argues, aptly characterise the group presentation of bands such as Ut. Exchanging instruments and roles after every song, Ut reflected an "internal democracy" and "non-hierarchical structure" that undermined stable group identity and identification with the singer/hero. Likewise, The Slits "made deliberate use of mistakes, silences and personally motivated or arbitrary shifts of pattern/feeling" that produced a musical texture characterised by "a continually shifting, polyvalent, hierarchical pattern."<sup>6</sup>

Graham's argument is powerful and intriguing. Yet surely such characteristics are not unique to all-women or women-led groups. In the 1950s and 60s, sound poets such as Henri Chopin and François Dufrêne exhaustively explored the non-semantic materiality of the human voice. And, at the close of the 1960s, male

experimental collectives such as The Scratch Orchestra and Musica Elettronica Viva modelled fluid, non-hierarchical ensembles that incorporated amateur performers. Yet, just as Cixous and Kristeva champion James Joyce, Jean Genet, Antonin Artaud and other male writers as exemplars of écriture féminine, so we might see these male musical precursors as fellow travellers in the project of resisting or undermining the structures of sexual-social power that pervade music and musical organisation.

In the quarter century since Graham's article, there has been a profusion of fem-fuelled rock, from Throwing Muses, PJ Harvey and Bikini Kill to Chicks On Speed, Peaches and Cobra Killer. At the same time, rock itself has arguably been feminised. A decade ago, Simon Reynolds coined the term 'post-rock' to describe the immanent critique carried out by groups that forgo rock's heroic narrative and its genital rhythm of tension and release in favour of soundscapes that disperse libidinal energy across an oceanic breadth that, for Cixous and Irigaray, figures female desire.<sup>7</sup> "Having exhausted the psychosexual dynamic of male rebellion," writes Reynolds with Joy Press, "rock culture is confronting the possibility that the only new frontier is the specifically female experience that has hitherto been left out of the script."<sup>8</sup>

Even so, Reynolds and Press concede what critics have said for decades – that rock is a fundamentally male form. "[M]ale ferocity, resentment, virulence is the ESSENCE," they declare. "Even the most striking and powerful of the new female artists are musical traditionalists, bringing new kinds of subject matter and subjectivity to masculine formats [... W]e've yet to see a radical feminisation of rock form itself."<sup>9</sup>

"Where are the great female sonic wizards?" ask Reynolds and Press.<sup>10</sup> The answer lies outside the rock fortress in the domains of experimental and electronic music, where women have played a prominent role for nearly a half-century. Although entirely ignored by the standard text on the subject (Michael Nyman's *Experimental Music: Cage And Beyond*<sup>11</sup>), pioneers such as Pauline Oliveros, Maryanne Amacher, Alison Knowles, Maggi Payne, Laurie Spiegel, Annea Lockwood, Eliane Radigue, Christina Kubisch, Meredith Monk and Ellen Fullman have been much more than a token presence within the experimental tradition and have produced work as significant as that of their male counterparts. The same is true today of experimental artists such as Marina Rosenfeld, Kaffe Matthews, Zeena Parkins, Andrea Neumann, Sachiko M and Maja Ratkje.

7 See Simon Reynolds, "Post Rock", in *Audio Culture: Readings In Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 358-61.

8 Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, And Rock 'n' Roll* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 385.

9 Reynolds and Press, *The Sex Revolts*, p. xv and 387.

10 Reynolds and Press, *The Sex Revolts*, p. 387.

11 Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage And Beyond*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

12 Pauline Oliveros. "And Don't Call Them 'Lady' Composers". *New York Times* (September 13, 1970), reprinted in *Software For People: Collected Writings 1963-1980* (Baltimore: Smith Publications, 1984).

13 "When Woman Is Boss: An Interview With Nikola Tesla By John B Kennedy". *Colliers* (January 30, 1926), available at <http://www.tfcbooks.com/tesla/women.htm>

14 John Cage. "Future Of Music: Credo", in *Silence: Lectures And Writing* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), p. 4. Friedrich Kittler. *Cramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 23.

15 Kristeva. *Revolution In Poetic Language*; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

What is it about experimental music that has attracted such a robust field of women artists? In a piece titled "And Don't Call Them 'Lady' Composers", written for *The New York Times* in 1970, Oliveros suggested that the marginalisation of both women and experimental music makes for a natural affinity between the two.<sup>12</sup> But perhaps the affinity runs deeper. For the most part, Oliveros's article proceeds along egalitarian lines, urging that the sex of the composer be considered irrelevant in the evaluation of music. Yet the article closes with an intriguing anecdote about the visionary electronics pioneer Nikola Tesla. Interviewed by *Colliers* magazine in 1926, Tesla prophesied "a new art of applied electricity" that would convert the globe into a vast electronic circuit in which "all things [would be] particles in a real and rhythmic whole." In conjunction with this development, Tesla insisted, women would emerge as intellectually and creatively superior to men.<sup>13</sup>

Tesla was a genius, but also a crank; and much of his utopian vision has not come to pass. But Oliveros' retrieval of Tesla is significant. For Oliveros and her generation, electronics opened up a new and uncharted world. Beyond the ordered, stratified domain of music, it gave access to what John Cage called "the entire field of sound" and what media theorist Friedrich Kittler has called "acoustic events as such": no longer merely pitches, scales and meters embroiled in formal systems of meaning and communication, but all the noises of the world in all their messy heterogeneity laid out on a single plane.<sup>14</sup> Kristeva calls this plane "the semiotic"; and philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call it the "body without organs".<sup>15</sup> All three maintain that it has a unique resonance with the feminine. For Deleuze and Guattari, the liberating transformation of the human subject and of music into a body without organs first requires a "becoming woman", a dismantling of the libidinal investments that characterise Man and Music as norms, and the cultivation of a broader range of affective relationships. From this perspective, experimental electronic music signals the becoming-woman of music; and women have a privileged relationship to musical experimentation. Here, women do not follow but lead. And this musique féminine offers a glorious world of noise that is hers and, via his becoming-woman, man's as well.