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[Contents](#)[MTO Home](#)[SMT Home](#)[MTO Talk](#)

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Volume 3.3:

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To Rosemary Killam: An Open Letter and Reply

KEYWORDS: analysis, musicology, criticism, gender

ABSTRACT: Professor Killam's article in *MTO* 3.2 relies on forms of rhetoric and argumentation which reiterate familiar tactics and reinscribe outmoded gender differences.

[EDITORIAL NOTE: Time was too short for Professor Killam to prepare a reply to the following open letter for this issue of *MTO*. Her response will appear in *MTO* 3.4, scheduled for release around July 20. Lee A. Rothfarb, General Editor]

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Dear Professor Killam,

[1] I will attempt here to reply to your *MTO* 3.2 article, "Cognitive Dissonance: Should Twentieth-century Women Composers be Grouped with Foucault's Mad Criminals?," in the form of an open letter to you. The reply takes this form in part due to the nature of your argument, and in part to my responses to it. I cannot find another way to reply than personally, since finally that's all my reaction to your piece can be. I have racked my brains trying to find some common ground for conversation with you (and the list) about what you raise. I cannot find it in what you write. Rather than condemn your effort out of hand, however, or escalate the anger which so plainly inspired the piece, I want to try to talk--again, *with* you, not at you, in so far as I can--about your argument and its effects (on me, at least).

[2] Let me say at once that I was neither outraged nor shocked by what you wrote, but only saddened. Furthermore, given this reaction, I must admit that, despite considerable effort on my part--as well as on yours--I learned nothing from what you said. You offer a very familiar argument. The notion that anthologies without woman speakers represent not oversight or rational choice but all-but-conscious bad faith by the (male) anthologist is by now commonplace. So, too, is the rhetorical tactic of reading unspoken (and projected) intentions in anthology choices. Finally, the use of scholarly discourse for "political" provocation is near to a hallmark of our age.

[3] Although such gestures may still have the capacity to annoy or wound their readers' sensibilities, they have lost the element of surprise. There is a difference between the shock of an

utterly unconsidered idea and the weariness of all-too-familiar harassment. The real indictment of rhetorical provocation is not that it is annoying or offensive, but that it does not work. Even at a *second* attempt, the intended provokee will simply opt out of the familiar shock experience.

[4] As a model of learning experience, shock suffers the limit of working only once. Even that first effect is not guaranteed. The rhetoric of deliberate shock puts an impossible responsibility on the reader, i.e., to *be* provoked. This is a reaction initially beyond our control, but subsequently entirely *within* it. In reading your article, I not only did not choose to be outraged, I simply could not be; those sensations have been numbed by overstimulation from other sources. In attempting to force readers into a sensitivity they are absolutely presumed to lack, the achieved reaction can be just the opposite. Give a reader or listener no room for creative response, and the result, sooner or later, is some form of desensitization.

[5] I have spoken thus far as if it were incontrovertible that your aims were provocation and shock. Among other things, your surprise at the lack of reaction to your piece on mto-talk speaks to this contention. More importantly, does your essay even allow for another kind of reaction? You can hardly have expected a measured, pipe-smoking discussion of your claims when their manifest aim is forcible consciousness-raising. The form and substance of your essay catch your reader in an inescapable vise. You discuss the intentions of four anthologists, reading them such that only *one* interpretation is possible (the three apparent variants you offer will be discussed presently). To address motive and inspiration is to leave argument *qua* argument to one side--the more so since your hapless anthologists' alleged intentions are in their turn used as a symptom of a "cultural climate." This interpretation is then offered in a way which further interprets the reader's intentions in advance. I mean simply this: you do not *allow* for a reader who reads your paper and reacts to it with unconviction: "Yes, I have read your arguments and understood them, but I disagree. I am not convinced that these anthologists have wilfully neglected woman composers." In your discourse, there is no such thing as anthological inadvertence, no room for the conviction that gender is anything less than a crucial determinant of musical experience.

[6] Instead of arguing *for* the thesis that gender is a decisive dimension for musical analysis, you denounce those who fail to act in accord with this view. The three 'hypotheses' for the absence of female composers become three "causes." What begins as the "exclusion" of women composers in your first paragraph is called "inexplicable" in paragraph 9, but has become "the possible *causes* of [the] *omission*" in paragraph 11. By paragraph 12, "contemporary theorists' *need* to ignore works by women composers." Paragraph 15 speaks of their "*erasure* from our analytical literature," and 16 asks "What better cultural *punishment*...can be *devised* (however unintentional) for women composers, than to ignore their work in the books which the theoretical community designates as central to learning twentieth-century compositional and theoretical techniques?" The highlighted terms show how the rhetoric becomes drastically more transitive as the essay proceeds. The decision which even the anthologists themselves see as an oversight has become direct and active complicity in oppression. Without *direct* argument, the necessarily limited act of selection has taken on the character of violent and indubitable suppression.

[7] This tactic saddens me for several reasons. Quite apart from any grammatical nuances here, I do not believe that "not including" someone or something is intrinsically the same as "excluding" them, let alone for the horrendous reasons you suggest, such as deliberate silencing and punishment. The gap between "non-inclusion" and "exclusion" may be fine, but to traverse it successfully takes a careful, substantial, and specific argument. To suggest that because the "culture" as an abstract whole silences women, then these anthologists do, too, is to confuse Straus and Kostka with Hefner and North. (Even among males, there are significant nuances of attitude.)

[8] The choice of attacking analysis anthologists for their non-recognition of woman composers still begs the larger question of *what* it is that anthologists should recognize. As I understand it, your complaint is not simply that women deserve equal representation in analysis anthologies on general principles of fairness, but because their music presents specifically, even uniquely female dimensions of musical experience. Are there, however, any even faintly satisfactory criteria for woman's musical procedures in particular? I realize that some attempts have been made, especially by Susan McClary, but even she spends the bulk of her time in denouncing the signs of patriarchal

oversight. I'm not arguing that analysis or music are immune to politics, or to class, or to gender, or to gender, but posing the question which I've grown weary of seeing left in abeyance: if music analysis is a specific, coherent procedure, what contributions to it does the factor of composer gender offer? And how will analysis enrich and be enriched by such understanding? Again, I can see that there may be some perceived political or moral benefit in creating more "inclusive" anthologies, but what *specifically* analytic benefits accrue from such a choice?

[9] Instead of posing a largely empty rhetorical question such as

Could exemplifying analysis through compositions by women, who are defined by our culture to embody illogic, constitute an implicitly inappropriate pedagogical approach? [20],

it is time to establish exactly what can be accomplished by accepting gender as a genuinely ontological criterion for music. It has not proven easy to do this for (arguably similar) criteria such as nationality and ethnicity, but such efforts have not gone entirely unrewarded, either. The record for some other politically-born criteria have been less promising. To me at least, the attempts of proto-soviet musicologists to adumbrate social class as an *independent* element of musical expression have been a resounding flop, save at a level of futile indirection: it *audibly* costs a lot more to build and maintain a culture which bears *Don Giovanni* or Peking Opera than it does unaccompanied field hollers or pan pipes. However, that still doesn't say anything about the music beyond its cost.

[10] I do not believe that an argument of this kind helps to establish or clarify the nature of women's music, nor the role of women composers in musical analysis. Instead, and despite your explicit repudiation of "binary oppositions" and simplistic arguments, all roads here lead to ever more abrupt contradistinction between the genders. There is a recognizable place for me in your article, and I see it all too clearly: I am "a" male. While I take no offense at the noun, the article bothers me tremendously, because you make no case for it. I can no more see myself as "a" man than I can see Ruth Crawford Seeger as "a" woman composer. It is not one's sacrosanct individuality which is undermined by this gesture but, on the contrary, the principle of identity itself. Foundationalism or no, essentialism or no, "a" category must have "a" basis of some kind. There must be some tangible principle for understanding what a term brings together and unites. Quite simply, what do we gain, *how* does it help us to see each of Seeger, Beach, Schumann, Bley, and Joni Mitchell as "a" woman composer? Attacking anthologists for their failure to follow this principle before any real efforts have been made to establish it seems unfair in the extreme.

[11] That is why I have composed this reply as an open letter. Although without anger, I took what you said personally in several senses. You present a version of scholarly conversation which is deeply troublesome to me since it sets so little store by fairness and openness, and so much on its own rhetorical privilege. Despite the richly woven fabric of plausible deniability, I hardly think that it's my own paranoia to claim that this article cannot help but address men and women in a forcibly different sense. And, despite the appalling history of men addressing women in terms of similar or even worse condescension, the homily that two wrongs do not make a right applies here. Like all too many now, your cure for the injustices of gendered language seems to be homeopathic. Finally, your assurances that the coming generations vastly outdo you in radicalism is depressing beyond words. I can only assume that means even more effort will be expended in denouncing those who do not believe in what has yet to be explained, more preemptive strikes and shock and terror in place of argument and discussion. If that happens, then it will be a sense of music of both women and men which is sacrificed on the altar of political intransigence.

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 [Return to Beginning](#)

---

[Contents](#)

[MTO Home](#)

[SMT Home](#)

[MTO Talk](#)

---

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*prepared by*  
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