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Life Outside the Canon? A Walk on the Wild Side

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ABSTRACT: This paper gives an overview of analytical work since 1997 on music outside the canon, and argues that music theory on the whole embraces scholarship that addresses previously marginalized topics. Positive signs can be seen in conference programming, publications, and job opportunities. I suggest that the field of music theory presents encouraging possibilities in the new millennium for those who want to build a professional life outside the canon.

[Bibliography](#)

[References](#)

[1] The invitation I received last fall to participate in this millennial panel requested that I address the topic of how "music theory goes outside the canon." Although I had never considered myself a specialist in this emerging area of research, I am happy to be associated with it because I believe music theory's current vibrancy can be attributed to our profession's welcoming of a diversity of thinking about topics of study and methods of analysis, a trend that I hope will become a fixture in the new millennium.

[2] Because the six papers delivered at the 1997 SMT special session "Music Theory: Practices and Prospects" (two of which were given by my plenary session colleague Patrick McCreless and our session chair Janet Schmalfeldt) reflected upon directions music theory has taken over the past decade and were subsequently published in *Music Theory Online*, my contribution to today's collective gaze into music theory's future will begin by surveying its very recent past--since 1997--as marked by its analytical ventures outside the canon.⁽¹⁾ After assessing music theory's present attitude toward non-canonical music, I will argue that the profession has demonstrated a real interest in scholarship that tackles topics previously marginalized or absent altogether in the

music-theoretical literature. This professional encouragement can be measured by conference program committees' acceptance of papers and panels that explore new topics and offer fresh approaches; publishers' and editors' active pursuit of writings that expand the analytical canon; and an interest by search committees in candidates who can teach in areas outside of the Western European art music canon as well as the standard tonal and post-tonal repertoire. Using a single case study, I will suggest that the field of music theory presents encouraging possibilities for those who wish to build a professional life outside the canon.

[3] The appended bibliography represents the remarkable diversity of the methods and musics engaged by theorists over the past three years and includes conference papers, articles, and books on topics as eclectic as bebop, soul, pop, rock, music by women, American music, and music of Africa, Bali, and Java. These writings have introduced new possibilities for understanding a rich assortment of music. To highlight a few examples: Susan Fast explores how gender and sexuality are represented in the music and visual iconography of Led Zeppelin; Shaugn O'Donnell considers musical metaphors in relation to the Grateful Dead; and David Temperley examines syncopation in examples by the Beatles, Fleetwood Mac, Marvin Gaye, Spin Doctors, and Pearl Jam within a theory of meter. Thanks to SMT's embracing of new perspectives, facilitated by the efforts of its past presidents including Janet, Pat, and Joe Straus, the Society has nurtured work in pop and jazz, and interdisciplinary work in feminist theory, gender studies, philosophy, cognition, and critical theory. An astounding five panels at the 1999 SMT meeting were devoted exclusively to topics organized by so-called "special interest groups"—*Gamelan Theories*, *Western Theories*, organized by the SMT Committee on Diversity; a special session on Italian feminist theory organized by the SMT's Committee on the Status of Women; *Music Theory and Queer Issues*, organized by the newly minted SMT Gay and Lesbian Discussion Group; *Timbre and Technology in Rock and Rap*, organized by the equally new SMT Popular Music Group; and *Ellington: The First One Hundred Years*, organized by the SMT Jazz Theory and Analysis Group. Papers in general sessions also contributed to this healthy opening up of the canon—keynote addresses by Willie Anku on rhythm in African music and by Jose Luis Martinez on art music of India, Karim Al-Zand's paper on improvisation in Cannonball Adderley's "Straight, No Chaser," Robert Morris's examination of variation and process in south Indian music, Walter Everett's study of harmony in the music of Steely Dan, and Timothy Koozin's investigation of structural and thematic aspects of Sarah McLachlan's music. Publications will, I trust, eventually blossom from these initial conference offerings. The music theory community should be rightly proud of the stimulating array of topics and methodologies spun out in Atlanta.

[4] While this overview of recent scholarship presented at conferences and published in books confirmed my sense of music theory's increasing inclusivity, it also showed that the canon dominates one significant body of writings: music theory journals. A survey of articles published since 1997 in *Music Theory Spectrum*, *Journal of Music Theory*, *Music Analysis*, *Perspectives of New Music*, *Music Theory Online*, *Intégral*, and *Indiana Theory Review* turned up many studies of works by canonical composers: Schoenberg, Stravinsky, J. S. and C. P. E. Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Berg, Schumann, Boulez, Ligeti, Messiaen, Wagner, Brahms, Liszt, Beethoven, Debussy, Bruckner, Janáček, Prokofiev, Bartók, Schubert, and Webern. Eric F. Clarke's article in a recent issue of *Music Analysis* is unusual on three counts: it discusses popular music, music by the difficult-to-pigeonhole composer Frank Zappa, and music by a woman, P. J. Harvey.^[2] Not only is there still a pressing need in the new millennium for our music theory societies to diversify their membership with regard to gender and race, but music theory journals also need to publish scholarship on music by women, popular music and jazz, American music, and non-Western music on a much larger scale. I am not suggesting that research on canonical composers should be dispensed with; I am saying that music theory journals need to become more diverse. When included in such journals, research outside the canon of Western European art music is legitimized as serious and necessary scholarly work, and can lead to recognition in the form of awards by our professional societies, which in turn helps younger and independent scholars get a boost on the job market and eventually to gain tenure. As the editor of an academic newsletter,^[3] I am only too well aware of the difficulty in securing such contributions--good work has often been promised to another editor, the work is not ready to be published, and so forth--but to say it simply, and to say it again: we must and can do better.

[5] Speaking about music theory as a profession brings me to my next topic: I would like to address the question of whether choosing to "walk on the wild side" with the music of Lou Reed, Cibo Matto, Kaija Saariaho, Sting, Mary Lou Williams, Koo Nimo, or Adam Guettel rather than with Bach, Beethoven, Berg, or Boulez will result in one's exclusion from scholarly circles and academic delegitimization. Because time did not permit me to conduct a survey on these issues with a statistically significant population, I decided instead to share with you my own experience as a case study. I will first briefly sketch some of the approaches I have used to address two non-canonical areas of research--music by American women composers and popular music of the past three decades--and I will then consider the ways that such work fits into the profession.

[6] In writing a book on the twentieth-century American women composers Ruth Crawford, Marion Bauer, and Miriam Gideon, I wanted to develop a branch of music theory that is markedly feminist; this impulse led me to consider elements not typically embedded within the fabric of music analysis.^[4] Situating compositions within their historical, political, and social contexts, *Gendering Musical Modernism* presents close readings that recognize the impact of the composer's gender, politics, and social views on the music itself; relates pieces to specific incidents in the composer's life that occurred at roughly the time of composition; and links narratives in the pieces to the composer's identity as projected in her writings and in reflections by her contemporaries. My analyses of Crawford's String Quartet, movements 3 and 4, Bauer's Toccata for piano, Gideon's song "Night Is My Sister" for voice and string trio and her duo for violin and piano entitled "Esther" map out a relationship between musical structure and gender-specific events that recognizes and critically comments upon the inequity of the sexes as experienced by these women. My analyses of Crawford's song, "Chinaman, Laundryman," and Bauer's Chromaticon for piano examine how aspects of identity including the composers' political beliefs and social views may likewise be inscribed in compositional structures. My analyses, moreover, do not speak with a disembodied authority; they depart from music theory's traditionally objective stance and are marked by my own identity.

[7] My work in popular music is also interdisciplinary, rooted in a perspective informed by cultural studies, feminist theory, ethnic studies, and postcolonial theory. Building upon the work of scholars who have brought critical questions about gender, race, and sexuality to bear on popular music studies, I examine a variety of works from the past three decades with particular attention to the ways in which cultural politics have been absorbed into popular music, to structural aspects of individual musical works in relation to their social and cultural contexts, and to the effects within a larger cultural economy of musical representations on both their intended audiences and those they represent. One example is my recently published study of a musician whose work I've admired for nearly twenty years, the British singer and songwriter Joan Armatrading.^[5] I argue that Armatrading's songs convey a female experience as it has been shaped by her own identity, including her gender, race, and sexuality; and that her identity, frequently conveyed in encoded forms, can be uncovered through close readings of both the musical structure of her songs and their lyrics.

[8] During the years that I was on the job market seeking a tenure-track position in music theory, I found that, by and large, choice of a research topic alone did not usually exclude candidates from consideration--in

fact, search committees frequently pursue candidates whose research is off the beaten track. When faced with hundreds of applicants, many of whom seem to be perfectly qualified for the position, a search committee may very well be attracted to those candidates who explore non-traditional repertoires in imaginative ways. There are, of course, those people who will not have heard of a composer or group or genre to which you have devoted years of study, and who may consequently dismiss your research as unimportant. But I am pleased to report that many in my generation have secured satisfying jobs in which their research is valued, or obtain their first job by working in more traditionally accepted areas and then turn to alternative genres as post-dissertation projects.

[9] As an associate editor of *Perspectives of New Music* and as a member of the editorial boards of *American Music*, *Women and Music*, and the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, I can say with certainty that strong work that presents bold, new perspectives is in demand, and that the editorial boards with which I have been affiliated seek more diversity in their submissions. I believe that it is crucial that those people who can have an impact on what is published and who is hired advocate work that presents innovative perspectives. Music theorists who produce cutting-edge work on lesser known or marginalized repertoires must receive our support, encouragement, and recognition, before we lose an entire generation of scholars to the vagaries of the academic job market. In the new millennium, we must continue to embrace the opportunity to expand our analytical horizons, rather than retreating to the safety of name brands.

[10] In his afterword to the 1995 collection, *Concert Music, Rock and Jazz Since 1945*, Nicholas Cook observes that essays on popular music topics in the book use "established concepts in order to legitimize repertoires that have not up to now been taken seriously," and he notes further that "[w]here the legitimacy of the repertoire is not in question, you can afford to be much more adventurous in your approach; you can afford to take risks with the music."^[6] In the context of his comments on my contribution, an analysis of the third movement of Ruth Crawford's String Quartet, Cook muses: "Who knows what Ellie Hisama could do with Beethoven?"^[7]

[11] Cook's friendly invitation has prompted me off and on over the past five years to publish such an analytical study. But I am still more interested in analyzing the rich body of music that remains untheorized. By virtue of the increased interest in and tentative acceptance of feminist methodologies and popular music topics in our field, I'm fortunate to have the freedom to work on music outside the analytical canon without feeling obligated to write on more traditional topics. I hope that in the coming millennium we will continue to branch out by drawing upon insights from feminist theory, cultural studies, critical theory, ethnic,

gender, and sexuality studies, postcolonial theory, and diaspora studies to invent subfields in music theory that we haven't yet imagined. As my own experience suggests, it is possible to forge a professional life in music theory through alternative approaches and repertoires--reason enough, I think, to walk on the wild side.

[Allen Forte's response](#)

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