



A woman's voice: The politics of gender identity in music therapy and everyday life



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ABSTRACT

In contrast to a comparative model of gender that implies that gender is something you have, a performative model of gender points towards gender as something that is construed in relationship and in context. From this perspective music therapy can be understood as an arena for performance and negotiations of gender. In this process, music therapy can conceal a range of socio-cultural and political dimensions significant in how people manage their sense of self, health, and well-being. This article explores how gender and sexuality are located through singing as a musical act and cultural gesture, and how the social presence of the voice is implicated in sexual politics. Using the experiences of a young woman in music therapy as a point of departure, this article examines the notion of interrupted voices in everyday life and therapy.

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"I have a desire to sing", says Susanne when she comes to music therapy for the first time. Susanne has never dared to sing in front of other people, but it is something she really wants to do. "I think I want to sing out loud", she tells the music therapist. After a few tentative explorations they start to sing together. Susanne stops: "My voice is too low! I can't reach the high notes. . . girls are supposed to have high voices".

As a child Susanne had been made aware that her voice was different. At home her elder brothers teased her about her "low" voice. Eventually she was sent to see a speech therapist to "correct" her low voice. She disliked these sessions as they made her feel different and took her away from her normal schooling. From then on, where she had opportunities to sing, in school, in church, in a band where she played the keyboard, she felt intimidated by listening to the high pitched "twitterings" of the other girls, and she faced the repeated sense of lack of ability when songs were performed in a soprano/alto range: "Usually when in a sing-a-long they use the keys in the song books, and they are too high pitched for me. When singing in church, most of the psalms are written by men, for men, and perhaps it is easier for men to sing in that key. It is strange in church they do not manage to let people sing, because when you sing together there is this sense of belonging, and all the good feelings you get when singing".

Through the music therapy sessions Susanne discovered that music could be transposed into a key that fitted her voice. As she

sang her favourite songs, songs she long believed were unsingable, she noted: "It's the key that is wrong, not my voice! "Summing up her experience Susanne stated: "To be able to sing in music therapy has been an experience of a concrete confirmation in an area that I have felt insecure". Feeling more secure about singing allowed her the bodily pleasure of having used her own body to make music and giving her a sense of a "restarting" her body. She articulated that through singing she became connected to her feelings of being "womanly", as she increasingly used her voice to sing for her children and hummed to herself when doing housework.

Introduction

In this article we will explore the relationship between the processes of music therapy and the significant socio-cultural and political dimensions that influence how an individual manages their sense of self, health, and well-being. Focusing on the ways in which performance of gender is implicated in a variety of musical practices, we intend to trace how the socio-cultural-musical context experienced in everyday life can be an important factor in understanding the therapeutic process and any individual's relationship to music within therapy. With the female voice as the starting point, we will explore the idea of how gender may be delineated, interrupted or disrupted through the act of singing. We will examine this gendering of the voice as it occurs in the broader socio-cultural context and consider the consequences for music therapy such a positioning of voice may impose.

The opening vignette, which forms the springboard for this discussion, is a narrative based upon the experiences in music therapy obtained through participatory observation and a research

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interview.¹ The first author served in the capacity of both music therapist and researcher. The therapeutic process was a short-term therapy of eight sessions where the focus of the collaboration was on finding possibilities for Susanne to sing. The collaboration involved active music making as well as verbal conversations about her relationship to music, singing together, and exploring her voice and singing abilities. The therapeutic approach can be described as resource-oriented (Rolvsjord, 2010).

Susanne's experience of her voice is in some ways a very personal narrative, exemplifying the personal explorations of her gender identity and its relationship to her voice. Yet Susanne's story goes beyond the purely personal, as her performance of gender can only exist in constant dialogue with the surrounding social and cultural context. As such, her story has a range of political implications, as her "negotiations" of the cultural and social concept of a feminine voice involves what can be termed "interrupted femininity" (Green, 1997, p. 52ff). Through our explorations in this article, we hope first to accentuate how the politics of sex, gender, and difference are of importance to music therapy. Second, we hope that this example can serve as a case demonstrating aspects of the interaction between processes in music therapy and the broader context of social, cultural and music politics.

In line with a range of other disciplines that take the processes of gender to be core to how we construct our identity and experience the world, we will highlight how our musical worlds consist of musical interactions that afford gender identity in a variety of significant ways. From issues of equal access and participation to education, professional music making, and the institutions that support such activities, to interaction with musical instruments and the meaning of sound itself, gender and sexuality are considered a central part of both the historical and contemporary experience of music (Green, 1997; Halstead, 1997; McClary, 1991; Whiteley, 1997).

Although there seems to be a growing awareness of political and contextual aspects of music therapy to a large degree spawned by the Community Music Therapy movement (Ansdell, 2002; Pavlicevic & Ansdell, 2004; Rolvsjord, 2010; Stige & Aaroe, 2012; Stige, Ansdell, Elefant, & Pavlicevic, 2010; Stige, 2002, 2003), discussions of sex, gender or feminist theory have had a peripheral role in music therapy discourse. Some noteworthy early contributions include the doctoral work of Curtis (1997) who introduces feminist therapy as an approach to music therapy, and the exploration of gender issues by Körlin and Wrangsjö (2001) and Meadows (2002). The recent emergence of feminist thinking within the discipline evidences the contribution of such perspectives while at the same time demonstrating the need for more research into gender issues in the field (Hadley, 2006; Hadley & Edwards, 2004). The main focus in the feminist contributions in music therapy so far has been on elaboration of a feminist therapy approach in music therapy (Amir, 2006; & 2006; Merrill, 2006; Purdon, 2006; York, 2006). Recent contributions highlight aspects of social activism related to feminist music therapy (Baines, 2013; Curtis, 2012). Contributions in the realm of feminist perspectives in music therapy have to a lesser degree emphasised feminism as a critical perspective, although there are a few texts such as Edwards (2006) and Rolvsjord (2006) that have explored the relevance of feminist critique in music therapy. Of specific interest for this article is the work of Veltre and Hadley (2012) who describe the use of Hip-Hop in feminist therapy with adolescent females. Their article discusses the representations of gender in Hip-Hop culture with regard to participants' gender identity and social context.

Our focus in this article will be the gendered singing voice and how it can be understood in relation to music therapy and everyday life. The use of the singing voice is an integrated part of most music therapy practices where therapist and clients improvise, sing, or create songs. There is also a growing discourse that specifically focuses on the singing voice and voicework in music therapy. The research in this area centres around two main strands, one medical oriented and one psychotherapeutic (Uhligh & Baker, 2011). Voicework in medical contexts has focused on music therapy in the assessment and treatment of voice- and speech-problems caused by a variety of medical conditions (Baker & Uhligh, 2011). More relevant to the scope of this article is the psychotherapeutic use of voicework presented in several texts such as those of Austin (1999, 2002, 2008), Newham (1999), Pedersen (2003), and Storm (2007). However, this literature has mostly taken a psychoanalytically-oriented approach with the focus on the intrapsychic experience. Contextual aspects of voice are rarely explored, but some authors note that individuals can find the effects of having someone critique their voice devastating, with the result that their ability to use their voice freely is completely inhibited (Austin, 2008; Oddy, 2011). In contrast to the individualistic psychotherapeutic approaches mentioned, Uhligh (2006) explores meaning and the use of the voice in various historical and cultural contexts. She also briefly discusses some aspects of sexuality and voice, and link the female voice to the maternal (Uhligh, 2006, p. 29ff), as well as to various healing practices emphasising the authenticity and emotionality in the female singing voice (Uhligh, 2006, p. 13ff).

The performance of gender in music therapy

In 1949 feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir famously stated that, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman...it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...which is described as feminine" (de Beauvoir, 1988, p. 295). This was arguably the modern day starting point for the development of a range of interactive models that "construe gender as something people do, rather than something people have" (Haavind, 1998, p. 257). Judith Butler's work has been important in the development of a concept of performativity, describing the performance of gender as the condition of creating an identity through the enactment of the specific roles and behaviours that define that identity (Butler, 1990, 2004). What is important to emphasise with such an understanding of gender as performed in social-cultural and historical conditions is that sex and gender are not static reproductions of being male or female, but are radically changed through human action (Alvesson & Billing, 2009, p. 22). In this sense, we perform gender. We construct the experience and concept of gender in the dynamics of our daily life and all the relationships within it, and in doing so we perform being male, we perform being female. Our gender is not fixed, static, or determined by physical sex differences, but is always in a state of flow between biology and culture and the relationship between people.

Thus, a performative model of gender points towards gender as something that is construed in relationship and in context. Consequently gender should be seen as "ongoing", constantly negotiated in social relationship (Haavind, 1998, p.257). The concept of negotiations is crucial to our understanding of this, because this also involves a connection between body, social-cultural context and discourse. At this point we want to emphasise that although such perspectives consistently challenge biological determinism, a performance approach to gender does not need to oppose any differences, or dichotomize the ideas of materialistic and discursive approaches (Hemmings, 2011). In simple terms, gender can be viewed as something that people do (West & Zimmerman, 1987),

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