

# Gender in Higher Music Education

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This paper explains and discusses the role of **gender in higher music education**. It does so by first outlining the debates about **what 'gender' is** and how it operates through power imbalances and differences that are social and cultural. Further, we describe the main results from research about gender in higher music education institutions in Europe through three themes: **gender and music**, **gender in higher music education**, and **the gendering of professional roles**. Thereafter the paper problematizes gender as an analytical category through an **intersectional** lens and discusses the problem of **sexual harassment**, **sexism**, and other harassment in higher music education institutions. Finally, we discuss how **to challenge gender issues in higher music education**.

## What is gender?

An everyday definition of *gender* simply states that there are two genders, male and female, that are biologically different and treated differently in culture and society. During second wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970's this way of defining gender was widely challenged by feminist theorists who argued that gender roles are created in socialisation – and that the sex one is born with does not determine the social gender one inhabits in society. This feminist critique problematizes that some roles and work, such as raising children, are best done by women. Also, the oppression of women in culture and society was challenged by scholars discussing how gendered power operated, through for example the socialist feminist theory about the structure of *patriarchy*. Patriarchy was a concept introduced to explain how social systems reproduced male power when men were holding political leadership, were privileged in social settings, and owned most material assets in a society (conditions that are still in place today).

Feminist theory has since grown to be a vibrant field that focuses on how femininities and masculinities as well as gender identities outside of the binary man/women take form, are treated and politically changing in culture and society. Importantly, Judith Butler (1990) was one of the theorists that problematized the division between gender and sex arguing that there is nothing 'before gender', rather sex/gender is constructed

performatively. By seeing sex/gender as performative, she argued that sex/gender is processual, created in all speech and actions, and never a finished product. In her way of understanding gender, the construction of gender always involves the construction of *heterosexuality*. That is, for Butler a person is not fully understood as a woman if she is not heterosexual, because heterosexual relationships are central to how we understand male and female as opposites. Butler uses the concept '*norm*' to illustrate how dominating ideas about who is a woman or man have material consequences – that is affects how persons can live their lives, get work, be accepted in society etcetera.

Lately Butler has in public debate argued that gender is changing in the 2020's and that we can see a change in the category 'woman', being more inclusive for example for lesbian women and for transwomen. Also, the binary idea of society consisting of 'men and women' has been challenged by activists for intersex people and persons that are non-binary, neither men nor women. In current feminist research the importance of social and symbolic ideals for the construction of gender is widely agreed upon, still there are also many scholars that acknowledge and discuss the importance of bodies, materiality, and difference for gender in contemporary cultures.

## Gender and music

Policy documents, on international and European levels, state that music shall be accessible to all, independent of any factors that may be discriminatory or unfair. But this has not in fact been achieved. It has been stated that traditional gender structures are produced and reproduced in professional musical life (Ganetz et al., 2009) and that the music community has an over-representation of men. Popular music musicians' work is clearly segregated: the "singer" position is seen as belonging to women, while instrumentalists are male musicians. Not least the role of the electric guitarist and the music producer are male dominated (Bayton, 1998; Green, 2010; Ferm Almqvist, 2021). Singing, and especially singing in a high register, is associated with women or gay men. Depending on the cultural, historical, and musical contexts where men sing, singing can also be regarded as an act of masculine behaviour, for example in the jazz and popular music industry as well as in opera and musical comedy. Earlier research suggests that when men sing, they often obtain appreciation for their singing performances. On the other hand, when girls choose male connotated instruments, they tend to be praised for being sexy or good-looking, instead of being treated as skilled instrumentalists (Borgström-Källén, 2021; Ferm Almqvist, 2021).

In Western art music, musicians' work is also divided by gender, women are primarily employed as singers, violinists, flutists, and harpsichord players, while men work as composers, conductors, bass-players, percussionists, and brass players. French horn,

cello, clarinet, and piano on the other hand seem to be occupied by both genders. This gender division influences the make-up of teaching staff in higher music education institutions. In fact, music, what genres and styles are seen as more valuable (and mainly masculine) and less valuable (and mainly feminine) in Western art music culture has been found to be gendered (McClary, 1991; Citron, 1993). In addition, music history and music theory are themselves gendered disciplines (Maus, 1993).

## Gender in higher music education

Music education practices are to a great extent steered by norms, around gender, music genres, and other norms of society and culture. For example, whose ideas are deemed interesting, what is valued as musical skill, who can develop as a musician, and how musical knowledge should be performed are all values created in relation to norms. Research on music education and gender shows that music teaching and learning also is an arena where gender is shaped (Abeles, 2009). This is displayed in choice of instrument and genre, the possibility to claim space, power relations and subordination from gender perspective. Such norms are reproduced by musicians who teach in higher music education, and are educated within the institutions, where they have been taught by others, who have also been educated there.

Within higher music education teaching is primarily formed in the *master-apprentice tradition*, where students are expected to imitate and “become” their teachers. As Gaunt (2017, p.38) expresses it, the model of imitation is seen as contributing “detailed musical and technical expertise to be developed and refined, almost as it were by physical and mental osmosis”. Such a view can also reproduce gender, the teacher has the power to decide what to play and how it should be interpreted. It has been found that students of different genders are treated differently by their masters, and that music education promotes male students, or females who accept male influences, values, and ways of behaving in teaching situations. It has been shown that a gendered polarised view of musical genres is common in music educational settings. This affects who is “suitable” to play certain instruments or certain genres.

Also, when it comes to what students learn, studies show that male students develop musical content and expertise. Female students tend to focus on the musical whole, instead of their own parts, being concerned about practical things around musical situations, helping others, “jumping in” to complement missing parts in the whole production, to a greater extent than male students (Ferm Almquist & Hentschel, 2019). Caring for the whole responds to gender norms, according to which women take more social responsibility. Below, we *underline the risk* that such expectations negatively impact on careers for women in higher music education. *Educational relations* in higher

music education take place in interactions between teacher and student, and in interaction between students.<sup>1</sup> It has been emphasized that gender related behaviours, agreed-upon norms, imaginations, and expectations, as well as use of language, limit music students in the educational situation. It has been shown to be important that music students get opportunities to affect how they realize their ideas and use the musical space to transgress such gender stereotypes. How can music teachers create an environment where music is created and investigated, where it is possible for *all* students to reach their full musical potential? One important task for the teacher is to approach students in a way that makes them use the space of education independent of their gender. This can break the habit where women limit themselves and all students could get the sense that musical spaces in higher music education are for everyone. In addition, all students should be encouraged by their teachers and classmates to use and develop musical abilities and visions in music educational activities.

## Gendering of professional roles

When discussing gender and higher music education, it also becomes relevant to shed light on the interplay between music education, gender, power, teaching and research positions. The number of women on all academic levels is increasing, and most undergraduate students are women. While inequality remains, it is more subtle than before. For example, men are still holding more prestige positions, a fact that cannot only be explained by age, discipline, and generation. In addition, women in academia do a lot more so-called glue-work, to keep things running at a department. However, there are some characteristics of higher arts education that differ from other academic disciplines. For example, the criteria for assessing quality, especially of artistic works, are relatively unclear, making assessments diverse (Blix et al., 2019). When it comes to promotions to higher academic positions, studies show that experts rank men with the same merits higher than women. Quality remains gendered, which underlines the need for explicit criteria of quality in the performing arts.

A recent study performed in Scandinavia (Borgström-Källén, 2021) problematizes construction of expertise and excellence within music education in relation to gender and positions with high status. The author underlines the double subordination of female professors in music education at conservatories, compared to male professors in artistic disciplines. She shows that music education is positioned as peripheral and feminine, the discipline is called into question by players from other disciplines, musical performance, and musicology for example, often by male artistic professors. The interviewees express that gender inequality is a struggle and an everyday problem. "On paper I'm a professor,

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<sup>1</sup> See Anna Bull's expert paper from Assembly 1.

but at my department I'm positioned as a woman working in pedagogy. They think research on young children is of no value, and you become positioned even more as a woman" (Borgström-Källén 2021, p. 258). The example illustrates that gender inequality exists between professors and disciplines in higher music education. And that having female professors does not solve gender inequality.

## Identities and intersectionality

When scholars have examined the importance of gender in higher music education, 'gender' has increasingly been problematized as a category that can be examined on its own. Feminist politics and feminist theory have been challenged for building on a universal idea about 'woman'. The problem of such a unified subject – unifying all women's experiences – is that focusing on what unifies 'women' obscures other social categorizations that divide them. Feminist theory and politics have been called out as promoting a 'woman' that is really pseudo-universal, mirroring interests of certain groups of women: white, middle class, ethnic majority, heterosexual and able-bodied women.

An *intersectional* theoretical understanding of gender, class and race was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (2003) around 1990 to explain how gender, class and race interact in structural oppression of black women in the US. Crenshaw, a legal scholar, argues that structural intersectionality can be used to understand how power dimensions interact, how oppressions of race, class and gender make conditions and experiences different for women from different social and racial groups. Oppression, she argues, is not 'double' but plays out differently depending on gender, class, and race. Further, political intersectionality is a strategy introduced by her that requires addressing several oppressions at the same time, for example sexism, racism, and capitalism. It is according to her not enough to challenge gender oppression if other power imbalances are not also challenged. In higher music education institutions, as in higher education in general, sexism, racism, capitalism, homophobia, and the treatment of trans\* people should be seen as interacting for example in teaching. This paper has focused on gender in higher music education but from an intersectional theoretical perspective addressing gender inequality also involves addressing race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, and other power imbalances in higher music education.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This will be one of the aspects focused on in Assembly 3.

## Sexual harassment, sexism, and other harassment

One pressing issue in higher music education, that is also a gender issue, is sexist treatment and *sexual harassment* of students and staff.<sup>3</sup> Sexual harassment in the workplace has been discussed in feminist theory and political policy for decades. Defined as unwanted sexual attention that ranges from unwanted compliments, or touching to rape, sexual harassment survivors are mostly women, and the perpetrators are mostly men. Informal power structures and institutions that build their working and teaching methods on supervision where one person holds great power over others' careers have been identified as risk factors for sexual harassment. In higher music education the one-on-one tuition teaching and the master-apprentice tradition makes it easy for sexual harassment to occur in closed rooms. It is, however, not just these situations but the larger context of a very competitive field where a small group of people hold great power over a large group's future that is breeding ground for a *culture of silence* around sexism and sexual harassment. A culture of silence is a workplace culture where people are afraid to speak up about injustices, they see related to power in fear of losing their jobs or positions. To challenge sexism and sexual harassment the gendered power patterns in higher music education must be addressed. It is the gendered education and power imbalance that underpin misconduct.

## Challenging gender norms in higher music education

Based on the above, one task for higher music education, including leaders, organizers, and teachers, is to move past gender inequality, and transform music education. To promote equal possibilities to study music on a professional level for all students independent of gender, class and race. A critique of neoliberalism<sup>4</sup> in higher education and an intersectional take on gender and power are essential to tackle gender inequalities in higher music education (de Boise 2018). To transform higher music education, we need to be aware of what space for development can be created within legal frames and have ideas about how to use it. The invisible norms and structures related to gender and power have to be made visible by the institutions in higher music education, for change to take place.

Working towards gender equality in higher music education should be done in line with legislation, policies and steering documents, as well as in conversation with faculty,

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<sup>3</sup> See also Anna Bull's expert paper from Assembly 1.

<sup>4</sup> An economic and political model which dominates the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Within higher education this is expressed in e.g. assessment practices, in quality criteria and a focus on employability, marketing and the labour market.

leadership and students. When it comes to faculty, it is important to see all disciplines, subjects, and instruments as equally important, and to have the same expectations of all professors and teachers, independent of their gender. In the teaching situation it is important to be aware about what a teacher must *relate to*, what to *take responsibility for*, and *what to do* in ways that encourage equal possibilities to learn and develop for all genders. It is important for teachers to be informed on students' experiences and holdings in relation to the teaching content, which can, as we have seen above, be connected to gender. Students' motives for choice of instrument, experiences of role models, relations to chosen genres in a context, their impetus for development, and experienced power relations all affect their learning. To get such insights demands openness and curiosity in dialogue with the students.

As a teacher, or leader, in higher music education one should take responsibility for steering teaching and educational organization towards equal possibilities to learn and develop. This includes creating safe surroundings, where it is allowed to try out things and fail, to assure musical learning for all students independent of gender, to be open for and show different ways of being and becoming a musician, and not least reflect and improve the practice of giving response. When it comes to what teachers need to do, creating space that offer possibilities for equal growth is important, as well as making all students visible. For example, women can be encouraged to study double-bass, and teachers can reflect upon norms and structures that hinder such a choice. In addition, openness for the students' motivation, ideas, musical preferences, impetus, lust, and "personality", as well as the local institution and situation should be considered. Teachers must ask students what goals they have, what they want to discover and develop, and how teachers can contribute. One prerequisite for such actions is motivation among leaders, with the power to transform music education.

Collegial discussion about gender equality in higher music education is one way to illuminate what norms a specific institution is steered by. This discussion can lead to practically grounded policies using insights and knowledge, about how students can be viewed and approached equally. It is also crucial to highlight what frames are possible to influence, how the educational environment can be improved, what gender equality goals are set for a specific activity or semester, and what consequences for gender equality specific educational approaches have. These topics can be consciously developed in discussions involving faculty, leadership, and students.

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