

'What if music IS sex?': Suzanne Cusick and Collaboration

Fred Maus
University of Virginia

1 Shortly after a conference session in which I presented a paper, a woman I had never met approached me, smiling, and silently handed me a piece of paper. The plain black-and-white photocopy announced an upcoming conference: 'Feminist Theory and Music'. I was amazed – who had ever heard of such a thing? – and delighted.

2 We were at the 1990 Oakland joint meeting of musicologists, ethnomusicologists, and music theorists.¹ I had just given a presentation on Hanslick suggesting, among other things, that 'the most precise physiological analogue for the composition, as Hanslick has described it, is ... an erect penis which, like the composition, owes its condition to the fluid that engorges it'.² More generally, and perhaps more plausibly, I had argued that Hanslick's treatise *On the Musically Beautiful* both eroticizes music and fiercely resists musical eroticism. Hanslick's insistence on musical experience as disembodied contemplation of meaningless sound, normally understood as his chief contribution to philosophical analysis, was better understood as his misogynist, homophobic, and racist defense against intense, unruly musical pleasure, pleasure that he knew from his own experiences.

3 After I saw that flier, I never doubted that I would submit an abstract for the first Feminist Theory and Music conference. At the conference, held in Minneapolis in June, 1991, I was part of a session, 'Gendered Ideologies of Musical Analysis', along with Marion Guck, Ellie Hisama, Marianne Kielian-Gilbert, and Nadine Hubbs.³ It was good to give sustained attention, in that setting, to the problematic field of music theory, so influential in music curricula and, for the most part, then and now, so narrowly conceived. But more importantly, I encountered activist work from a stunning range of musical, scholarly, and political perspectives. The conference brought together practitioners of musicology, ethnomusicology, music education, composition, music theory, and performance. It seemed that everyone I met had been thinking in relative isolation about music, gender, and sexuality. The Minneapolis conference abruptly shifted me, and many others, out of the private excitement and frustration of an eccentric research path, and into a vibrant world full of extraordinary people and ideas, a world that we did not know existed. We were all indebted to Lydia Hamessley, who organized the conference, and to Suzanne Cusick, who worked with Lydia on the initial stages of imagining and planning such a gathering.

The quotation in the title of this essay comes from Suzanne's paper at that conference.⁴ I 4
knew little about Suzanne at that time; I am not sure I ever saw her before she gave her
presentation. I remember how much I was looking forward to the paper, because of its
title and abstract, and how disappointed I was when she began speaking in a language
that I did not understand. Confused, I wondered whether she was Italian, and whether the
whole paper would be inaccessible to me. Then Suzanne continued in English, and began
to explore the ways that people can be inaccessible or unintelligible to each other, and
the way that 'to say the word "lesbian" in a musicological crowd is to speak a foreign
language, though at first it may not seem so'.⁵ I had been given an experience of
incomprehension, and then warned not to trust my subsequent experiences of apparent
comprehension as the paper continued.

By now, I have read the published version of Suzanne's essay many times, and assigned it 5
to students in my courses, and drawn on it repeatedly in my own writing. Though written
in the style of a personal reflection, the essay contains bold, cogent argumentation.
Suggesting that 'sex' is at the intersection of pleasure, intimacy, and power, Suzanne finds
that the same may be said of musical experience. Among possible distributions of power,
Suzanne identifies with one in which two people, women, both of them socially
constructed as 'non-dominating', as 'non-power', enjoy 'a flow of power in both
directions', thus escaping the fixed power structures of the gender system.⁶ And she
identifies related issues of power in her preferred musical experiences.⁷ Lesbian sexuality
and lesbian musicality as ways of negotiating pleasure, intimacy, and power, avoiding the
fixed power hierarchies of conventional gender roles: there is a lot to work with in these
formulations, still provocative and stimulating today.

Still, the written text remains, for me, above all a reminder of that presentation in 1991, a 6
souvenir of a dazzling experience. I wondered at the time, and continue to wonder, what
that experience was. I was hearing an unusual academic paper; or perhaps it was personal
reflection as solo performance art, akin to the work of Holly Hughes or Tim Miller.⁸ When
I remember it, it feels a bit like remembering a dream; but a dream made up of insight,
not fantasy, so perhaps it was an experience of waking up. Hearing Suzanne's words was
also like sharing someone's experience of thinking. And what about that turning point,
carefully prepared but nonetheless so startling, the question 'What if music IS sex?'⁹ It was
part of a theoretical argument, carefully supported; but perhaps it felt more like poetry.
In saying that, I mean that the question, in its context, was like those moments, in hearing
or reading poetry, when an image catches one's mind, creating a change in the world that
is more about a change in experience than a change in belief. The exploration was
individual, with much more reference to the author than one might expect in an academic
setting. But it left me curious, eager to know more, not about Suzanne herself, but about
the diversity of musical experiences and their relations to other intensities.

In 2017, Suzanne was elected to serve as the next President of the American Musicological 7
Society. This position always goes to someone who has earned widespread respect among
musicologists. In the years since those early essays, Suzanne has published brilliant work

in the fields of early modern music and feminist and lesbian-feminist theory; to those areas she added a third, from 2006 on, in a groundbreaking series of essays about the U.S. deployment of music in torture. It is exciting that a career so persistently committed to unconventional, 'counter-cultural' thinking has led to recognition within AMS, an organization that has sometimes felt like an obstacle to intellectual and political progress. In this essay, I want to linger near the beginning of Suzanne's career, reflecting on some of what happened when we were colleagues.

During the academic year following the first Feminist Theory and Music conference, 1991–92, my department, the Music Department at the University of Virginia, announced a search for a scholar in 'early music', which we understood to mean European music of the medieval, Renaissance, or early modern periods. Why were we looking for an early music specialist? Because we felt it was crucial to have a relatively complete chronological 'coverage' of 'Western' music. At the time, we had no ethnomusicologist in the department, and no one teaching popular music. I had been hired in 1990. I was a spousal hire, and during my interview, several members of the department made it clear that they had little interest in my specific research or credentials; the department accepted my hire, with mingled gratitude and resentment, simply because they felt the need for an additional instructor. During my first year, we had a search in 19th-century music, that is, 19th-century European classical music, through which we hired musicologist Elizabeth Hudson. During that search I was startled to discover that, by studying the applications carefully and expressing my opinions clearly, I could have significant influence over the hiring process, despite my junior standing in the department. The following year, near the beginning of the early music search, Elizabeth and I realized that Suzanne's historical research qualified her for the position, and we worked hard to develop and sustain the department's interest in her. At that time I knew Suzanne mainly from her paper at the Feminist Theory and Music conference; Elizabeth was familiar with her feminist work on opera. Again, it was remarkable to see that the two most junior members of the faculty could play a significant role in the direction of a search. We were astonished and thrilled when Suzanne agreed to join our department. 8

Subsequently, during the 1990s we had a number of retirements and were able to reshape the Department through new hires. The most recently-hired faculty continued to affect the hiring decisions significantly, more so as we became more numerous. We hired Alicyn Warren, an imaginative composer of electronic music who also had significant accomplishments as a scholar; once she joined us, we had an electronic music studio run by two women. We hired Kyra Gaunt, an African-American woman who taught and wrote about African-American music. And we hired Michelle Kisliuk, a scholar of African music, especially women's music, whose PhD was in performance studies. It was a fabulous group of faculty, each of us deeply committed to innovative thinking and writing. The Department had changed dramatically in just a few years, becoming remarkably forward-looking and venturesome. In particular, we had rapidly gathered an impressive group of women doing feminist research; and, with Kyra, Michelle, and long-time faculty member Scott DeVeaux, we had three faculty working in African and African-American music. It 9

was a strange development for the University of Virginia, an institution that has tended to think of itself in terms of excellence but not innovation.

Some wonderful things happened during those years. When we had faculty on leave, we used our replacement hires to support early-career scholars whose work we admired; Lloyd Whitesell and Ellie Hisama had their first jobs as visitors at UVa. We brought many terrific guests to the University. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Wayne Koestenbaum came to present a panel on queer musicology. Marion Guck visited, joining Suzanne and me for a panel on feminism and music theory; we presented papers that later appeared in *Perspectives of New Music*.¹⁰ Nadine Hubbs brought us her first account of the writer and composer Paul Bowles, who had studied at the University of Virginia.¹¹ Pauline Oliveros came for a brief residency. I remember sharing a lovely meal at an Indian restaurant with Suzanne, Ellie, and Pauline. In 1997, Suzanne and I hosted the Feminist Theory and Music conference at the University.¹² In view of the staffing of our electronic music studio, we included a focus on female composers of electronic music as a prominent part of the conference program.

Suzanne's presence was crucial to all of these events, not as a dominating leader but as a brilliant participant with a commitment to listening, community-building, consensus (when possible), and open, vulnerable thinking-out-loud. Her presence in the department exemplified and generated the same collaborative spirit that she had celebrated in her essay on lesbian musicality. We experienced the tensions and rewards of frequent meetings in which we learned a lot about our shared views, our differences, and not least, our individual prejudices and self-limitations. Our collaborative work was sometimes arduous, but for a large portion of the Department it was admirably engaged and honest.

The most intense period of collaborative work came when we adopted a completely new set of requirements for the music major. Before 1997, our requirements consisted almost entirely of courses in the history of Western music and a three-semester music theory sequence; in addition there were two electives. With the new staffing that emerged during the 1990s, it was obvious that these requirements were inappropriate. We spent a full year in frequent meetings and retreats trying to imagine a new program. It took us that long to reach our conclusion, partly because there was no existing model for what we wanted; and partly because, in moving toward a de-centered curriculum, those of us who taught classical music had to accept, personally, a de-centered role in the program – which could feel like a loss of prestige. We had to recognize our own privileged positions in the hierarchy of academic music studies, and act on a desire to escape from those structures.

In the end, our solution was elegant, and has remained satisfactory for our department to the present, with only small changes over the years. We wanted all aspects of our program to be available to majors, with each student using our resources to create an individual trajectory. We adopted a set of core requirements including one course in the history of Western art music; one course in ethnomusicology or music outside Western art music, such as jazz or popular music; one music theory course; and one composition course. In

addition we created a new, a wide-ranging introductory course, and the remaining four courses were electives. The core requirements introduced students to various aspects of our department, and the electives allowed them to focus their continuing study in whatever way they and their advisor found appropriate. This new curriculum embodied respect for the potential contribution of each faculty member, and respect for the goals of individual students. It was not just an administrative solution, but also an ethical accomplishment. To sense the degree of innovation in this program, recall that 20 years later, the music department at Harvard adopted a very similar curriculum, a change that generated significant public controversy.¹³

Around the same time, we were planning to phase out our existing MA program and introduce a PhD. Suzanne chaired our discussions about the PhD proposal, and guided us to a set of requirements that is, like our undergraduate major curriculum, innovative, flexible, and humane. Among other changes, we eliminated programmatic distinctions among musicology, ethnomusicology, and music theory, gathering these studies under the name 'Critical and Comparative Studies'. The elaborate paperwork of our application to the state educational authority was completed by Judith Shatin; thus, we owe our PhD program to the administrative skills of two women. 14

As an instructor at the University of Virginia, Suzanne was a charismatic lecturer; a sensitive, skillful seminar leader; and a devoted mentor of many students. Her curricular innovations included an 'Introduction to Music' course that scrapped the familiar classical-music appreciation model, instead directing attention to the coexistence of European and African-American musics in the United States; and an Early Modern Music course for majors that set aside the conventional chronological survey in favor of a sustained study of different conceptions and practices of vocal music. Her attention to individual students was extraordinary; she lavished time on splendid students and also on students who were struggling. Several students who worked closely with her at UVa are now our professional colleagues. Holly Watkins and Melina Esse, graduates of our master's program, did PhD work at Berkeley and are now musicologists on the faculty at Eastman. Stephanie Van der Wel, another master's student, did PhD work at UCLA and teaches musicology at the University of Buffalo. Brad Rogers, a UVa undergraduate, did doctoral work in Rhetoric at Berkeley and now teaches in the Theater Department at Duke; he continues to write on music, gender, and sexuality. 15

I have been telling you the good parts. There is more to the story, of course. For one thing, the Music Department faculty were not, it turned out, uniform in their enthusiasm for our new directions and curricular changes, and this sometimes emerged in frightening ways. But more consequentially, there was a gap between the culture of our department, as it took shape during the 1990s, and the broader culture of the University of Virginia. Our rapid development during the 1990s was visible within professional music scholarship, nationally and internationally, but not within our own University. As a result, over a few brief years, we lost many of the people who were crucial to the department as I have described it. Specifically, we lost four outstanding members of the faculty: a female 16

composer of electronic music; a female African-American ethnomusicologist; Suzanne; and a female musicologist who had also become a very effective Department Chair – she has since gone on to head two major arts schools. The details of these situations are varied, complex, and often confidential. But there is a common feature: in each case, powerful administrative entities outside the Music Department showed little understanding either of these women’s individual excellence or of the unique department to which they had contributed so much.

We created something special, through painstaking effort along with good luck, and the University, in arrogant ignorance, let it slip away. Life went on, of course. Suzanne has had a splendid career at NYU. Presently the Music Department at the University of Virginia is as strong as it has ever been, especially with the presence of Bonnie Gordon and recent hires in popular music and ethnomusicology. Our first class of PhD students entered the year after Suzanne left; the program that she guided us in designing has produced fine scholars and composers. 17

In this narrative about a Music Department, I have mostly praised Suzanne not by singling out her achievements as an individual, but by describing a milieu that she helped to create and within which she made crucial contributions. I want to close by saying more about one of her individual achievements, the conference presentation and published essay ‘On a Lesbian Relationship with Music’ with which I began: specifically, I want to indicate ways that this essay invites collaboration from its listeners or readers. 18

I shall mention three unusual aspects of her presentation. First, the sentence I quoted in my title is not an assertion, but a question. And it is not a rhetorical question, a common feature of academic writing, but a real question; the audience is brought to wonder about possible answers. Indeed, each of the five sections of the essay has a question as its title, and the final section, entitled ‘What if music IS sex?’ continues immediately with a succession of *fifteen more* questions.¹⁴ This is a grammatical embodiment of the rhetoric and ethics of Suzanne’s text: throughout, and especially at the end, Suzanne invites us to co-create new ideas and experiences. Through the power of her words, she stimulates us to feel our own power as thinkers.¹⁵ 19

My second point has to do with concepts. Near the beginning of the essay, reflecting on some inconclusive conversations about lesbian identity and musicality, Suzanne suggests that her ‘puzzlement was partly a response to a conversational failure to define terms’.¹⁶ She then sketches a definition of sexuality in terms of intimacy, pleasure, and power, a definition that (as already mentioned) turns out to suit musical practices as well; and within that definition, she explores the specific qualities of lesbian sexuality. Suzanne asks, carefully and at some length, what ‘lesbian’ might mean. In contrast, she uses, but never attempts to define, her foundational concepts of intimacy, pleasure, and power. I suppose this lack of definitions might be regarded as a flaw, or perhaps an unavoidable consequence of writing a brief, ambitious essay. But I experience Suzanne’s use of these concepts as open, rather than vague, as another way to engage the ideas and experiences 20

of her audience, another way of asking questions. Hearing or reading the essay, each of us is invited to wonder how we understand the concepts of intimacy, pleasure, and power, and how we can bring them into relation with our experiences of sexuality and music. I remember in Berkeley, in 1992, after Suzanne presented the paper at another conference, a fascinating lunch-time conversation about intimacy, in which a small group wondered how the concept applied in various sexual situations. (I remember, among other things, the part where we talked about glory holes.) Our conversation was an appropriate response to Suzanne's deft invitation to think.

Third, I want to mention the final part of the essay, where Suzanne picks up her subtitle's incitement not to 'think' so 'straight'.¹⁷ She links the traditional musicological – and one can say more broadly, academic – focus on texts to compulsory heterosexuality; it binds us into dualistic relationships where we either grant power to the text or attempt through interpretive strategies to reverse the power relationship. Her stated solution is that we need to think of music as 'something *we do*', and we need to ponder our acts and pleasures without submitting to fixed categories and power relations. These are still important matters, of course. We always have more to learn about our unexamined assumptions, the heterocentric ones and many others, whether we are reflecting on musical experience, or redesigning a curriculum, or co-creating human interactions, or whatever else. Meanwhile, Suzanne's own essay, whether heard or read, has been showing us how a text can give away power, empowering *us*, drawing us into collaborative thinking.¹⁸

Notes

¹ The program of the 1990 conference may be found in the August 1990 AMS Newsletter, available at <http://www.ams-net.org/newsletter/AMSNewsletter-1990-8.pdf> (February 14, 2017).

² Fred Everett Maus, 'Hanslick's Animism', *Journal of Musicology*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Summer 1992), 273-292.

³ Lydia Hamessley's reflection on the origin of the Feminist Theory and Music conference series may be found here, along with links to further information: <http://www.femtheorymusic.org/ftm-history> (28 September 2018).

⁴ Subsequently published as Suzanne G. Cusick, 'On a Lesbian Relationship with Music: A Serious Effort Not to Think Straight', in Brett, Philip, Gary Thomas, and Elizabeth Wood (eds.), *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 67-83.

⁵ *Ibid.* 68.

⁶ *Ibid.* 72.

⁷ *Ibid.* 75-78.

⁸ For splendid examples of this type of performance, see Holly Hughes and David Roman (eds.), *O Solo Homo: The New Queer Performance* (New York: Grove Press, 1998).

⁹ Cusick, 'On a Lesbian Relationship with Music', 78.

¹⁰ Suzanne G. Cusick, 'Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the Mind/Body Problem', *Perspectives of New Music* 32/1 (Winter 1994), 8-27. Marion A. Guck, 'A Woman's (Theoretical) Work', *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Winter 1994), 28-43. Fred Everett Maus, 'Masculine Discourse in Music Theory', *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Summer 1993), 264-293.

¹¹ Nadine Hubbs, 'Intermezzo. My Dear Freddy: Identity Excesses and Evasions *chez* Paul Bowles', in Hubbs, Nadine, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 103-116.

¹² The program of Feminist Theory and Music 4 is available here:

<http://goldenpages.jpehs.co.uk/static/conferencearchive/97-6-fem.html>

¹³ For a more detailed description of our curriculum revision, see Fred Everett Maus, 'Ethnomusicology, Music Curricula, and the Centrality of Classical Music', *College Music Symposium* 44 (2004), 58-67. On the Harvard curriculum, see William Robin, 'What Controversial Changes at Harvard Mean for Music in the University', *National Sawdust Log*, 25 April 2017, <https://nationalsawdust.org/thelog/2017/04/25/what-controversial-changes-at-harvard-means-for-music-in-the-university/> (28 September 2018).

¹⁴ Cusick, 'On a Lesbian Relationship with Music', 78-79.

¹⁵ Cusick, 'Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the Mind/Body Problem', 17 states explicitly that feminist theory is oriented more to questions than to answers.

¹⁶ Cusick, 'On a Lesbian Relationship with Music', 70.

¹⁷ Ibid. 78-80.

¹⁸ The first version of this essay was written for the conference 'Women Music Power: A Celebration of Suzanne G. Cusick's Work', Columbia University, December 11–12, 2015. Information about the conference may be found here: <http://www.womenmusicpower.com/> (28 September 2018).

Bibliography

Brett, Philip, Elizabeth Wood & Gary C. Thomas (eds.), *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (London: Routledge, 1994).

Hubbs, Nadine, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

Hughes, Holly and David Roman (eds.), *O Solo Homo: The New Queer Performance* (New York: Grove Press, 1998).