



Gender and Sexuality
in
South African Music

Edited by

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This book is dedicated with gratitude to the staff of the Music Library of the University of Pretoria:
Isobel Oosthuizen, Gertrud Meyer and Marie Stals

Gender and Sexuality in South African Music

Published by SUN ePreSS, a division of AFRICAN SUN MeDIA, Stellenbosch 7600

<http://www.africansunmedia.co.za>

<http://www.sun-e-shop.co.za>

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First edition 2005

ISBN 1-919980-40-7

Set in 10/13pt Warnock Pro

Cover picture: *Embrace* by Philip Badenhorst

Cover design by Ilse Roelofse

Typesetting by Wikus van Zyl

SUN ePreSS is a division of AFRICAN SUN MeDIA, Stellenbosch University's publishing division. SUN ePreSS publishes academic, professional and reference works in electronic format. This publication may be ordered directly from <http://www.sun-e-shop.co.za>

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INTRODUCTION

During the past two decades, the study of sexuality and gender in music has become a decidedly mainstream activity. To be sure, music has long been obviously and intimately involved in matters pertaining to relations, both sexual and otherwise, between and amongst the sexes. Its use in courtship is the one that perhaps comes first to mind, this use being probably as old as music itself. But music's uniquely non-representational, yet deeply metaphorical properties have also allowed composers greater freedom to express desire – and its frustrations and fulfilments – more openly than other arts would commonly allow. Only a particularly prudish, Calvinist moralist in severe denial could believe that there is no sexual intent in works ranging from Orlando Gibbons's *Silver Swan* (who, 'when death approach'd, unlock'd her silent throat'), Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* with its prolonged climactics, to Chuck Berry's exhortation to 'play with [his] ding-a-ling' or the Beatles' questioning 'Why don't we do it in the road?'. This confluence of music and the biological imperative should not surprise us. If we accept as a given that music, being a product of human creativity, cannot but reflect the many facets of the human condition, then sexuality and gender – two inextricably linked, undeniable determinants of human behaviour and relationships – must have a major impact both on the music we write, perform and listen to, and on the way we write it, perform it and listen to it.

Following the lead of literary theorists and others, musicologists began in the last quarter of the twentieth century to explore not just the obvious musical representations of sexual climax that became common in the nineteenth century, and of which *Isolde's Liebestod* is the most famous example, but to venture beyond the orgasm, as it were, to investigate the complex ways in which constructions of gender and sexuality have throughout history impinged upon the musical artefact and the acts of its creation and distribution. There have indeed since been succulent fruits plucked from the musico-historical tree, be it in the guise of discussions of gendered form ('feminine endings' and the like),¹ or of the role of gender hierarchies in the activities of composer and performer. 'Gay' musicology has also positively thrust itself into the forefront of scholarship, and not just in the study of openly homosexual composers such as Benjamin Britten. While some still bemoan the manner in which formerly lovable figures such as Franz Schubert have now been 'outed' as supposed pederasts,² and while the potential for abuse and exaggeration is undeniable (it can only be a matter of time before Saint Cecilia herself is deconstructed as a myth of male transsexual desire in which her organ features large), there can be no doubt that – be it on the straight and narrow or the queer and wide – musicology today undoubtedly offers something up everyone's alley, albeit further up it than might be comfortable for some.

While gender studies are by no means foreign to South Africa today, these developments have had little impact on musical scholarship in this country. Musicologically speaking: in South Africa, sex is in its infancy. This is in some ways an odd fact, for South African society was for most of the second half of the twentieth century probably even more obsessed with sex than was the rest of the world. While one cannot ignore the economic and other reasons for apartheid, that system was, in a very fundamental sense, about sex. Its aim was

to prevent miscegenation, the mixing of races – which is a roundabout way of saying it was intended to prevent people who were not white from having sex with people who were. This horror of interracial sex even culminated in the complete denial by the white, nationalist establishment that the Afrikaans-speaking, Coloured community of the Western Cape might possibly be the result of congress between indigenous peoples and the colonizing Europeans. However, as J.M. Coetzee has written in his study of censorship, apartheid was in fact less concerned with preventing mixed-race sex than with preventing white women from having sex with non-white men.³ When one studies the texts by the early apartheid theorists to which Coetzee refers (such as those by Geoffrey Cronjé), these (male) writers in fact return again and again, and again and again, to their horror of ‘mixing the races’ to such an extent that one suspects that their principal fear is not that their womenfolk might *have* sexual intercourse with black men, but that they might *enjoy* it. Of course, this horrified fascination with black, male sexuality undoubtedly also has a strong homoerotic element, with repulsion and desire merging imperceptibly. This particularly paranoid aspect of apartheid theory has already been dealt with extensively by others, and is not our principal concern here. Nor can one reduce a complex political, economic and social system of repression only to feelings of sexual envy on the part of a genitally-disadvantaged white minority too scared to come out of the closet. And, of course, the fear of sex in South Africa was not just limited to the possibility of interracial coitus. In certain sections of society, not least in certain universities, the act of dancing was quite forbidden amongst the white population – a result of the perfectly sensible realization that music is, in the context of adolescent dance, a ritualised means of finding a compatible member of the opposite sex with whom one might go forth and multiply (though the implicit notion that dance might lead to unbridled sexual pleasure is perhaps little more than a repressed fantasy on the part of the representatives of white authority).

If one accepts, as posited above, that music reflects the human condition, a condition of which the sexual impulse is an integral part, then we must surely ask: how is music affected in a society that is so terrified of that natural impulse that it attempts to regulate it, to forbid it, to deny in some circumstances its very existence? These are some of the issues that the organizers of the conference ‘Gender and Sexuality in South African Music’ wished to confront head-on at the University of Pretoria in August 2003. The conference was made possible by financial assistance from the Travelling Institute for Music Research of the National Research Foundation of South Africa, and was the first of its kind to take place in this country. There are in fact many perplexing issues specific to South Africa that cry out to be investigated. There is, for example, the fact that some white, homosexual composers played a leading role in the Afrikaner establishment in the 1960s and ’70s. On the one hand, the *macho*, homophobic society in which they lived meant that they were outsiders; and yet on the other hand, at least one of those composers wrote cantatas glorifying the very society that deemed him to be perverse. But our aim was not just to explore the biographies of gay Afrikaner composers and their context in society, but to deal with general issues of sexuality and gender in popular, indigenous and art music. To what extent can gendered and sexualised hierarchies be discerned in South African music and music-making, both in the field of Western art music and in indigenous knowledge systems? To what extent has music been used here to support or subvert gendered societal structures? Between, say, the extremes of Hubert du Plessis’s *Suid-Afrika - Nag en Daeraad* and *Sarafina* – the one a triumphantly masculine, nationalist

cantata by a gay composer, the other a musical tale of a black girl coping with both puberty and racial oppression – between these two, there lie hitherto unexplored zones, erogenous and otherwise, that it is our task as musicologists to explore. While the ambitious scope of our conference prevented us from engaging in anything more than a surface excavation of our chosen field, we hope that its example might encourage and inspire others to dig deeper and longer, and expose to the light of day what has too long been hidden in the murky mires of recent history.

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¹ This being the title of Susan McClary's well-known book on gender in music. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

² See, for example, Lawrence Kramer's *Franz Schubert: Sexuality, Subjectivity, Song*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

³ See the chapter 'Apartheid Thinking', in J.M. Coetzee: *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

THANKS

The conference whose papers are published here was held at the University of Pretoria and made possible by the financial and administrative support of the Travelling Institute for Music Research of the National Research Foundation of South Africa. To these institutions we offer our grateful thanks, in particular to the then Coordinator of the Travelling Institute, Clare Loveday. Also involved in the organisation of the conference were Clorinda Panebianco-Warrens, Alexander Johnson, Hetta Potgieter, Ella Fourie, Joseph Stanford and Wim Viljoen. The Conference featured concerts of music by Peter Klatzow, Arnold van Wyk, Hendrik Hofmeyr, Hubert du Plessis, Jeanne Zaidel-Rudolph, Blanche Gerstman and Helena de Villiers, performed by the following students of the University of Pretoria: Tinus Botha, Theresa Burger, Kerryn Hendey, Karien Labuschagne, Anne Marshall, Wessel Odendaal, Stephen Pierce, Ben Schoeman, Amoré Steyn, Inette Swart and Janánda van Schoor. During the conference, the internet-based 'Dictionary of South African Composers' was launched, a research project of the Music Department of the University of Pretoria. It is located at: <http://www.sacomposers.up.ac.za/>. Leonore Bredekamp of the University of Stellenbosch provided assistance with the music examples. The editors are grateful to Philip Badenhorst for permission to reproduce his painting *Embrace* on the cover of this book.

BLACK MUSICALITY IN COLONIAL SOUTH AFRICA: A DISCOURSE OF ALTERITIES

Grant Olwage

There are numerous refrains in the colonial discourse on black South Africa. ‘Musicality’ is one.¹ For all the white writer’s revulsion at black musical practices, he – and, importantly, the sex of the authorial subject was almost always male – could not but help note the sheer amount of black musicking in the colonies. At times, so it seemed, only the limits of human endurance could put pay to ‘primitive’ singing-dancing. As the early comparative musicologist and author of *Primitive Music*, Richard Wallaschek, observed: ‘it has ... been demonstrated by ethnological research that to bring about bodily fatigue through the manifestation of energy in a perpetually-increasing ratio up to the last degree of lassitude is an indispensable feature of primitive art.’² In the logic of nineteenth-century biological racism, quantity was quality, and blacks were innately musical. In the Cape Colony the trope of black musicality extended from accounts of precolonial musicking to those of colonial performance, when from the last quarter of the nineteenth century white writers more typically encountered black mission station choralism. To sample only notable literary opinion: for Anthony Trollope, on a whirlwind tour of the eastern Cape missions, the ‘singing of hymns [was] a thoroughly Kafir accomplishment’, and for the colonial poet Francis Carey Slater, reflecting on his childhood spent at the Lovedale mission in the eastern Cape, the ‘Natives’ were ‘*born choristers*.’³ So widespread was the fame of mission musicking that the mission put out public disclaimers that its students were not spending all their time singing hymns.⁴

Like all colonial myths of alterity, black musicality had its ‘other’ back ‘home’, in the ‘deplorably unmusical’ Englishman; again, I stress the gender of the noun stem. What commentators diagnosed as the Englishman’s singing ‘*vis inertiae*’ seemed to testify to a pan-Victorian problem.⁵ For congregational singing, for instance, the educationalist and church musician John Spencer Curwen noted that ‘the majority of the men stand silent, and we must charitably suppose them to be making melody in their hearts.’⁶ It ‘is the *man’s* voice that we want’, implored *The Parish Choir*. ‘Women and children do sing already; but the congregational chorus wants the body, volume, and richness, which the man’s voice alone can give.’⁷

Popular choralism too became an increasingly non-male space as the century progressed.⁸ Throughout the Victorian era, singing in a choir was the one form of ‘respectable’ music-making for women that existed outside the parlour; it was one of the few public leisure activities available to women. As the demands by women for leisure participation increased, the number of women in choral societies and church choirs rose dramatically from the early to late Victorian periods. The structural make-up of the choir altered in the process. Before, altos were men and the highest part was given to boys. By the end of the century the contralto had replaced the male alto and sopranos were edging out boy trebles. It was at this time that the shortage of male singers and the numerical dominance of sopranos became a long-term

reality of choral demographics.⁹ As the *Magazine of Music* announced: it was ‘emphatically the age of Woman – with a capital letter’, and if ‘the sex’ was ‘pushing its way into every department of life and work which ha[d] hitherto been regarded as the exclusive property of the male’, the choir too had long ceased to be a male-dominated domain.¹⁰

Accompanying women’s move into the choir was a parallel discursive move that represented Victorian choral music as feminine. Exemplary of this strategy is a series of essays on ‘Victorian Music’, penned on the occasion of the diamond jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1897 by Joseph Bennett, then editor of *The Musical Times*. The sections on church, or choral, music are basically a chronological history of its composers. At one point, Bennett interrupts this narrative to give a synopsis of it, at the same time laying bare his method:

the reader will be asked to observe further movement in the direction of what, on the score of grace and sentiment, may be called femininity and, necessarily, an equal removal from masculinity as represented by qualities of intellect, science, and strength. This is the tendency of the age in all art, and Church music cannot hope to escape, notwithstanding its strong traditions.¹¹

Those ‘manly’ traditions became the measure from which church music’s increasing feminisation was charted: the music of successive generations of composers was progressively ‘emasculate’, until, arriving at the late Victorian present, cases of ‘decadence’ were found.¹² If Bennett concluded that ‘this branch of the art in England [was] sound’, it was only because he reclaimed the high Victorian composers as part masculine. John Stainer, for one, while commonly said to incline to ‘sentimentalism’ and ‘the effeminate’, was also, ‘in a greater degree’, a musician of ‘strength’ who could ‘hit with the hammer of Thor’. Besides, Stainer’s feminine choral music was really only a ploy for popularity, the sentimental tunes being ‘those which best please[d] the ladies.’¹³ The choir’s female audience and performers, it seems, demanded ‘same-sex’ music. Bred on these myths, of non-singing Englishmen and a feminine English choralism, singing blacks in the Colony must indeed have appeared different in their musicality.

The portability of the trope of black musicality – from precolonial through to mission musicking – perhaps also marked it out from ‘black music’, from a specific repertory of song. While travellers, scientists and missionaries were busy observing, or more likely recounting others’ observations of all-night singathons, black singers were curiously said to have no music. Quite late, the Lovedale newspaper, *The Kaffir Express*, restated the myth: ‘The Kaffirs do not appear to have had any airs of their own.’¹⁴ The basis for the claim, I suggest, was that a land without any music was fair game for the musical colonist, much as a land with no people had been there for the taking.¹⁵ We know all about the mission’s proscriptions against precolonial musicking. The conviction that black South Africans had ‘no music of any kind’ made the mission’s prescriptions of a new repertory – hymns, miscellaneous choruses, brass band marches – seem all the more benevolent.¹⁶ As the mission gave its converts the Word, so it gave them music *tout court*.

Less nefarious, the myth was also simply an all-too-common instance of cultural miscomprehension. When a mission article on ‘Native Literature’ claimed that there was ‘no heathen literature, no records of past events or thoughts’, but added that there were ‘oral traditions already waxed dim enough, and ... a folklore that has never been gathered’, it