

On the Musical Dynamics of Sex; A Defense of Sexual Politics in Music

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Music socializes us. In many ways, it surreptitiously allows us to explore who we are, and become better acquainted with ourselves. We can see that this is true by the way that popular music influences our youth. It provides one way that popular culture is able to express its concerns and thoughts surrounding many of the issues that we are confronted by in our lives. Recently¹, we have definitely seen music as an outlet for artists to express their concerns regarding everything from politics and social issues to gender issues and sexuality. These political statements are so strong, in fact, that they have been known to cause those with an opposing views to resort to violence. It is unlikely, then, that anyone would contest the view that social and gender issues are confronted in popular music.

What Susan McClary, in “Sexual Politics and Classical Music”, will show is that we can find these issues confronted in what we generally refer to as “classical music”². She

¹Relatively recently, anyway. In the last thirty or so years, we have seen a change in the meaning of popular music, with jazz giving way to rock music, and all that has been born from that.

²By this we mean “the standard concert repertory of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.” From McClary pg. 54

will speak almost exclusively about gender roles, showing, among other things, that it is possible to find sexual themes inherent in the absolute music itself. She gives examples of sex and gender issues from Bizet's *Carmen*, starting with the narrative, but then indeed showing that we find instances of sex expressed in the music itself. As further evidence of her thesis, she moves to a discussion of a different piece of music that we find composed and performed during the same time period "Tchaikovsky"s Fourth Symphony. After showing evidence of sex and sexual issues in the absolute music in *Carmen*, she uses the same means and arguments to show that we find evidence of the same in Tchaikovsky, in a musical work with no words or narrative at all attached to the music itself.

This is a difficult argument to maintain, and there are many apparent flaws in holding such a view. Indeed, we find many places where McClary opens herself and her argument to attack. I will address some of the most common counter examples and arguments that one may forward against her position. I will then defend her thesis against these attacks and, citing examples from the standard literature on the philosophy of music, show that it is indeed possible to express something like sex or sexuality with music.

The bulk of McClary's argument can be found in the commentary on some examples of the music that we find in *Carmen*. The first is found in the music of the "Habañera," before Carmen begins to sing. As Bizet's representation of Carmen is grounded in "the physical impulses of exotic, pseudogypsy dance," her numbers do not lend themselves to typical operatic designators (like aria or duet). "Her rhythms indicate that she is very much aware of her body. In fact, before she even begins to sing, her instrumental vamp sets a pattern that engages the lower body, demanding hip swings in response."³ Even inherent in the music alone we find our bodies leading our thoughts to matters of the erotic.

Let me begin to defend this statement with a quote from Peter Kivy. "The emotive life for Matheson, is by all means, the way our emotions feel; but it is also, I would

³McClary pg. 57

suggest, the way we express them in gesture, facial configuration, posture, and so on.”⁴ Just as a devil’s tone⁵ stirs in us a certain sentiment or emotion, and evokes a certain physical or psychological response, the rhythms of the music in *Carmen* stirs an erotic sentiment, and evokes the appropriate physical response. Admittedly, at first, this seems like a bit of a stretch. But is it really such a stretch to suggest that it is possible that the listener is encouraged to experience the music with his/her body and therefore the music is itself expressive of sexuality. In fact, this is exactly what other forms of art, such as painting and photography do. An artist offers an image, and allows the viewer to bring the appropriate values to the experience. Furthermore, it does not seem like a stretch at all to forward the claim that a genre such as photography can produce a work that is expressive of sex. It does this all the time, and often better than we can do with words. Photography allows the viewer to bring with him/her all sorts of thoughts and prejudices to the experience. But in fact music allows us to more intimately bring our own thoughts and prejudices into the art than any other genre we can list. By this argument from analogy, it seems obvious that music should be able to be expressive of sex.

A further example comes when McClary notes that, “Carmen’s music is marked by its chromatic excesses.” Her chromatic descent forces us to experience every step as she alternatively “coaxes and frustrates,” the listener in her lamentation of the Habañera. She pauses on a C-natural just long enough to frustrate, before moving back on to irregular triplets that seem to move unnaturally against the rhythm of the music. “In her musical discourse, she is slippery, unpredictable, maddening.”⁶

Another objection that might be forwarded by a critic is this: of course we find these allusions to sex in her song; she is singing, and it is easy to convey the expression of

⁴Corded Shell pg. 40

⁵The Danse Macabre, or devil’s tone, is a term used to describe the diminished fifth. It is used to represent a morose, or somehow non-angelic, sentiment. See the opening of Strauss’ *Alpine Symphony – Sunrise*.

⁶McClary pg. 58

sex with the human voice. But if there is any sexual content expressed in the song, it was brought by the listener. This objection is easily met with a little scrutiny. The objection seems to have two parts: (i) whatever she conveys, she does so with words, and (ii) the human voice can convey things that music cannot. As for (i), yes, she is singing a narrative, but she is singing it in French. And it is easy to imagine a listener who does not understand much French taking from the music everything McClary says that he/she will. What we receive from Carmen's voice is something beyond the words. It doesn't seem to matter who is singing, or what the words are.⁷ Which leads directly into (ii). It need not be the human voice carrying out Carmen's narrative at all. Indeed, we can imagine any number of other instruments indulging in similar "chromatic excesses" and carrying out the same climax. For example, imagine a synthesizer with a "human voice" stop. A skilled pianist (synthesist?) could bring about the same effect, and there need not be a single word uttered or sung during the entire performance. Or, in a case that sticks more loyally to the example, we can similarly imagine that the performer *did* perform the tune, but without singing; she could trill and hum, producing the same effect, using no words. Proof of this claim comes in the form of a performance of *Carmen's Fantasy*⁸, by Sarasate by a very gifted violinist named Sarah Chang. We listen intently to the depth and passion of the performance. We can picture the violin's voice as Carmen, singing to her lovers, taunting and tempting them. After the recording is over, we are shown a picture of the performer, and are shocked to find ourselves staring into the face of a six-year-old girl. It seems impossible to attribute all this sexual passion to the playing of such a young child, and yet it must come from somewhere. Indeed, McClary would say that it is in the music. Inside the chromaticism and hip-swaying rhythm, we bring our own prejudices; it is obvious that they are not put there by a

⁷Ironically, Hanslick makes this point clear in "On the Musically Beautiful," in a criticism of the expression of emotion. "When Orpheus' aria *Che faro seza Euridice!* moved thousands ... to tears, Boyé, ... remarked that one could just as well ... set the opposite words to the same tune." Hanslick pg. 17.

⁸Sarasate, Opus 25.

little girl. Kivy discusses this exact phenomenon in “The Corded Shell.” He refers to his theory as the ‘Contour Model’. While discussing an aria for Barbarina, he notes some particularly emotionally expressive passages throughout the movement. There seems to be a sighing or weeping quality to Barbarina’s music. This is accounted for, Kivy shows, by the analogy that we find between the music and human expression. This is the contour model. More formally, it may be stated as,

(ConM) Musical structure resembles the behavior that is expressive of one or another emotion.

So we see that, often, when we attribute human qualities to music (such as sadness or lamentation), it is easily explicable in terms of the contour model.⁹ Some aspect of the music strikes us in an analogy to human expression (be it voice or some other behavior). Much of what we call program music adheres to this contour model.¹⁰

With this model in place, we are better equipped to defend McClary against further possible attacks. While I have shown thus far that her voice is not necessary for erotic expression, I have not shown satisfactorily that Carmen’s song actually is capable of itself expressing sex. Kivy’s contour model is just the tool we need for the job. Further textual support is lent to McClary by the contour model throughout her paper. When singing of his longing for Carmen, José, the male protagonist, “he sets up a pitch ceiling that constricts his melodic line” (thus recreating in sound the experience of frustration).¹¹ The listener can hear his frustration in the contour of the music as an analogy to the human expression of frustration. Later, she demonstrates the masculine aspect of the Tchaikovsky piece with the triumphant militant sound of marching soldiers. We can nearly hear their melodic footsteps in the music.¹²

Yes, says our conscientious interlocutor, but a closer reading shows that even Kivy

⁹Kivy pg. 78

¹⁰See again Strauss’ Alpine Symphony – Sunrise, or Ian Wilson’s String Quartet #2 (The Capsizing Man).

¹¹McClary pg. 59

¹²McClary pg. 71

would not say that the contour model alone is capable of explaining all we want it to, all by itself. The contour model does its best work when it is found together with what Kivy calls the “convention theory”. It is important to realize, Kivy shows, just how “second hand” the materials are that composers have to work with. Just as the words and phrases are ready made for a writer (in that he does not invent them anew from the individual letters of the alphabet), so are the musical materials second hand for the composer. These musical materials are bound up with tradition.¹³ For our own purposes, we shall specifically note Expressive Convention, which formally states that,

(ExpConv) There are conventions in accordance with which we see behavior as expressive of one or another emotion.

How is it, then, that we expect to get all this work out of the contour model, when in fact, it seems like the convention model is the real workhorse? While Kivy notes that the contour and convention models are unequivocally bound in a sort of synergistic interaction, Kivy never confuses the two, and neither should we. Some aspects have the property of being expressive due to the contour model, others due to the convention model. If we refer again to his Barbarino example, this is made clear for us. What aspects of the music, Kivy ponders, lead us to the conclusion that music can be expressive? And the more relevant question – what aspects of *Carmen* actually are capable of expressing sexuality? For Barbarino, Kivy cites tempo, and the “dissonant appoggiatura,”¹⁴ as examples of features that depend on the contour model. Similarly, the tempo, as well as the chromatic and instrumental vamp of *Carmen* would depend on the contour model to explain their expressiveness. The convention model, on the other hand, explains things such as the music’s major or minor tonality. Everything important to maintain the consistency of McClary’s theory is captured in the contour model, with those conventional aspects additionally welcome.

¹³See again *Danse Macabre*. A further example can be seen in the convention that the minor keys traditionally denote a sad theme, while a major key, the opposite.

¹⁴Kivy pg. 80

While quite possibly unbeknown to her, McClary's theory receives gracious support from all sides from contemporary musical philosophical literature. What she says quite simply is that inherent in classical music are the same types of stereotypes and gender issues that we find in contemporary popular music. What we have seen is that it is completely possible to express things like sex and sexuality with music. What she proves for us is that in a piece such as Bizet's *Carmen*, sexual expression runs deeper than most would have ever expected.

1. Hanslick, Edward, "On the Musically Beautiful", trs Geoffrey Payzant. Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1986.
2. Kivy, Peter, "Sound Sentiment: An Essay on the Musical Emotions". (Including the complete text of *The Corded Shell*.) Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 1989.
3. McClary, Susan, *Sexual Politics in Classical Music*, in McClary, "Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality" (University of Minnesota Press, 1991) Ch. 3, pp. 53-79.