

Contemplating Musical Experience for Women in Prehistory

Deborah J. Sidel

MATX 791

Professor Lynda Weaver-Williams

November 25, 2015

Parameters

Despite a general agreement amongst scholars which accepts the axiom that in prehistory musical activity was situated in religious or spiritual experiences, we have not seemed to have recognized the fundamental and pervasive role of music in indigenous cultures which precludes our stretching backwards and connecting with our musical roots. “Investigation into the evolution of (other aspects) of human culture and behavior has a long history, spanning a number of disciplines, including archaeology, biological anthropology, psychology, philosophy, and linguistics”.¹ “The evolution of musical abilities, [however] has been relatively neglected, especially in the latter half of the twentieth century.”² In attempting to understand musical behaviors, evidence from many fields of study have been brought together. This multidisciplinary approach relies upon work in paleoanthropology, archaeology, ethnomusicology, neuroscience, developmental and social psychology, and evolutionary biology.³

The title of this research paper, “Contemplating Musical Experience for Women in Prehistory”, could imply many things. To clarify, the term “women” is used to refer to people within the female continuum of gendered relations while “musical experience” refers to music *participation* in all of its positionalities. There is no universal concept of what music *is*. It is a culture specific concept and some cultures don’t have a word for music (as we in the West describe it) nor do they sever dance from music. Western musicologists’ conception of what music is informs their investigations. Provisionally, for the purpose of this paper, music is to be

¹ Iain Morley, “Conceiving Music in Prehistory.” In *The Prehistory of Music: Human Evolution, Archaeology, and the Origins of Musicality*, Oxford University Press (2013) 2.

² Ibid. 2.

³ Ibid. 3.

understood as humanly organized sounds. Prehistory in its strict sense refers to the period prior to written-records which ironically has no specific discernible start date and most would agree with Iain Morely who states that the end of prehistory and “start” of history is very different in different parts of the world. “In a broader sense, the term prehistory is also often taken to refer to the ancestral forms of things.”⁴ The actual “origin” of music cannot be established and is not the concern of this study. Rather, it is the broader or looser understanding of prehistory that is used.

Why Contemplate?

The historical narrative of women in music history has much to gain by pausing and deciding to take the long view, the diachronic approach. Even though the phenomenon of music is intrinsically elusive and infused with semiotic ambiguities and complexities, women have always participated in and expressed themselves through musical activities. Western scholars have constructed an androcentric and narrow narrative of historical musicology, particularly in collegiate music programs where their concept of what constitutes music, and more to the point, “good music”, is Eurocentric. The arbitrary marker of a nod to Greco Roman roots precedes an abrupt fixation on early Christian music. Thus, in a synchronic approach, selected music is extracted from our collective sonic fabric and obsessively dissected for analysis, is reified and becomes canonized. It is not surprising that the musical participation by women is very rarely documented nor included. Meager examples of women in music emerged and have been cited from the 1800s onwards within the academic discourse. This can be directly linked to Christian ideology and its subsequent repression of women within patriarchal societies. The normative narrative of music was written by men who wanted to write about men. Many feminist scholars

⁴ Ibid. 3.

had entered the field of musicology by the 1980s, yet despite all of the diversity and hybridity of interests, traditional historical musicology remains doggedly dominant in today's university settings, reflecting the systemic, hierarchal power politics in academia.

Musicology is a conservative, insular discipline within which feminist inroads were late in construction in comparison to other fields such as literary criticism and other fine art traditions. It wasn't until the second wave of feminism that feminist musicology/ethnomusicology established a marked presence. Indeed, it was second wave feminist theory and later poststructuralist feminism that facilitated the challenging of the categories of sex/gender/sexuality.⁵ Prior to this, feminist musicologists generated volumes of compensatory scholarship that placed women at the center of their discussions about musical and cultural production. Ultimately they were still seeking external validation through inclusion into the androcentric and hegemonic canon. Transferring existing musicological methodologies onto the experiences of women has not been authentically transformative or empowering for women in music. The perimeters, as well as who inhabits the margins of hierarchal categories, are intact. Also intact is the undervaluing of women's musical experiences and the ways that they think and feel about music, which affects how musicology continues to be shaped. It is a self-perpetuating loop. By choosing to transgress beyond the Greco Roman marker, beyond Christianity as a centerpiece, and most importantly beyond trying to adhere to a prescribed insistence of what music *is*; portals to the "unprecedented" become possible. Yet, in order to discuss musical activity in quotidian terms, common characteristics have been constructed from a wide spectrum of perspectives.

⁵ Rachel Lewis, "What's Queer about Musicology Now?" *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 13(2009): 44.

Attributes of Pan-cultural Musicality

Anthropologists and ethnomusicologists have delved into the fray of articulating common musical features of human societies. Professor Bruno Nettl asserts that all societies have vocal music and rhythmic production either by striking objects or the body while Professor Tramo includes the emotionally charged perception of consonance and dissonance.⁶ Musical behaviors also involve the “encoding of sounds into pitches and organizing them into sequences so that they have a deliberate temporal relationship to each other.”⁷ In contrast, Professor Brandt considers music as “creative play with sound”, foregrounding the process by which sounds are produced and perceived rather than the specific nature of characteristics within a musical context.”⁸ Others state that “music is the acoustic result of action” or “a structured and intentional succession of movement-produced sounds”, and that music embodies and entrains our intentions.⁹ These ethnomusicologists have focused more on the analysis of music itself and the methodology of its study rather than the traditional uses of music and its instrumentation by societies. Anthropologists attend to the nature and uses of music and often concentrate on the resulting musical forms that are created due to assimilation from outside influences. As mentioned earlier, it is a commonly accepted axiom that musical participation was situated in religious or spiritual experiences in prehistorical societies, and furthermore, that all of life was sacred. A sacred/secular dichotomy is indiscernible. Just as music cannot truly be severed from dance, musical experiences in prehistory cannot be severed from spiritual/religious

⁶ Morley, “Conceiving Music in Prehistory”. 6.

⁷ Ibid. 6.

⁸ Ibid. 8.

⁹ Ibid. 8.

experiences/activities. Even today, “music is not *genuinely* separable from other aspects of our lives and interactions.”¹⁰

Music as Multidimensional and Multifunctional

In his book, *Traces of the Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music*, Robin Sylvan discusses the connection between music and religion. He emphasizes the power that music wields in being able to transform our experiences and that there are important musical dimensions to religion and important religious dimensions to music. The connections between religion and music are fluid and overlapping and they increase each other’s effectiveness.¹¹ Both music and religious experiences function simultaneously on many different levels that synergistically work together.¹² He theorizes that music functions simultaneously on the following levels: physiological, psychological, sociocultural, semiological, virtual, ritual, and spiritual.¹³ Somatic, emotional, and intellectual processing of sound create relationships and meanings that are attached to musical experiences and through consensus of opinion, become traditions.

Sound and music have been used in religious contexts since prehistory and the structure of that organization is but one expression or reflection of the culture in which the music exists. In his book, *Sacred Sound: Experiencing Music in World Religions* (2006), Guy Beck coins the

¹⁰ Ibid. 308.

¹¹ Robin Sylvan, *Traces of the Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music* (NYU Press, 2002), 21.

¹² Ibid. 21.

¹³ Ibid. 21.

term “sonic theology” for his current work which explains the concepts and issues surrounding musical tone and its relation to the sacred in religious traditions. Beck argues that the role of music often parallels the role of worship in religion, functioning in some kind of relationship to what is of absolute value to believers. It can be expressed in terms of myth and ritual.¹⁴ Beck organizes the roles or functions of music, specifically of chant in theistic traditions, as a means to approaching the divine into the following: 1) within the concept of sacrifice, seeking favor or blessing or asking for forgiveness, 2) doxological or offering praise, 3) protection and invoking healing powers, 4) mnemonic devices in remembering historical or mythic events, 5) petitionary prayer, 6) catharsis and purification, 7) representing or expressing a future state of being (messianic songs), 8) didactic or teaching doctrine, 9) create a mood of contrition, 10) tonal invitation to any deity or spirit to a sacrifice or worship occasion, 11) aids in achieving states of ecstasy and bliss, 12) brings about communion between human and divine worlds, and 13) contributes to the awakening and development of spiritual consciousness.¹⁵ Beck’s list provides clarity in identifying and recognizing the phenomenon of musical-religious experience which reasonably could be expected to have occurred in prehistorical societies. Although, we will never know exactly how ancestral musicality actually sounded, or any music before electronic recording for that matter, there are extant indigenous societies whose members participate in rituals which provide a glimpse into the prehistoric sonic world. The oldest of such rituals are located within the spiritual practice of Shamanism which could serve as a useful template for discussing musical experiences for women in prehistory.

¹⁴ Guy Beck, *Sacred Sound: Experiencing Music in World Religions* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006), 16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 16-17.

Music and Shamanism

A shaman could be described as the great specialist of the soul whose main function is to restore and maintain balance in the community. When Russia colonized Siberia in 1552, scholars appropriated the term “shaman” from the Evenki and Tungusic people. The term subsequently traveled via anthropologists to America where indigenous Indian societies were being studied. It is now a term used by Western scholars in the discourse of many distinctly different cultures. Music is very important in shamanistic rituals. Thomas DuBois devotes an entire chapter in his book, *An Introduction to Shamanism*, to explaining how music functions and serves both the practitioner and community. Central to the shaman’s skill set is the ability to enter trance states and music is a key tool (along with entheogens) employed in doing so. It (music) can seize control of a shaman’s consciousness and propel the shaman to unseen dimensions. Music is the medium through which a shaman can communicate with the spirits and conversely can be the medium that the spirits choose to communicate with the community.¹⁶ Musical performances can serve as acoustic records of these encounters with spirits. Music helps to frame and identify a situation as a shamanic ritual. It shapes the bodily sensations of the ritual participant or audience as when the community supports and encourages the shaman through vocalization, drumming and the sounding of bells.¹⁷ “Music can also constitute part of the symbolic code by which particular spirits, spirit worlds or levels of cosmos, shamans, or community members are identified within a ritual.”¹⁸ Shamans deliver their healing words through songs and these

¹⁶ Thomas A. Dubois, *An Introduction to Shamanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). 204.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 206-207.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 209.

become a community's sonic chronicle of the spiritual contacts which have been experienced over a span of generations.¹⁹ Music holds great power because it is detachable: it crosses generational, social, and cosmological boundaries creating linkages that allow the shaman to move between disconnected areas or statuses.²⁰ DuBois has established a scenario of potential musical experience for women in prehistory that is drenched with semiotic meanings. Another anthropologist, Marilyn Walker, champions music as "knowledge" in shamanism, as a source of ethnic identity as well as a world view.

In her article, "'Music as Knowledge in Shamanism and Other Healing Traditions of Siberia", Walker insists that we recognize the importance of experiential ways of knowing. She examines the role of music in shamanic ritual which provides a context for a discussion of music in relation to the study of Indigenous Knowledge, ethnic identity, shamanism, and healing involving music.²¹ Walker writes, "Shamanism is now being written about, not simply as a practice, but as a world view; not as a past evolutionary stage in human development or an unviable, outdated tradition but as a marker of ethnic identity and cultural survival."²² Shamanism incorporates music as communication amongst humans and other sentient beings and as being able to actualize other realities for the benefit of the world.²³ She remarks that most of the existing descriptions of ritual music has been reductive, "losing the meaning generated in performance through repetition, variation, elaboration, or adaptation."²⁴ She stresses that

¹⁹ Ibid. 209.

²⁰ Ibid. 213.

²¹ Marilyn Walker, "Music as Knowledge in Shamanism and Other Healing Traditions of Siberia." *Arctic Anthropology* 40, no. 2 (2003): 41.

²² Ibid. 42.

²³ Ibid. 42.

²⁴ Ibid. 43.

Western scholarly texts have resulted in “analysis” rather than “experience”, fragmenting the musical experience and thus, missing a shamanic gestalt. Walker coined the term “enic”, meaning the experience is “entered into”, alluding to the need for a new research paradigm. Writing about a transitory shamanic experience is difficult but “new technologies might be able to provide more suitable ways of documenting such traditions”.²⁵ Walker continues, postulating that shamanic music may archive language that has been lost in everyday speech, and that it “is a community’s archives on the physical, symbolic, and subtle planes”.²⁶ The descriptive field work of Diamond Jenness on the Copper Eskimos of Arctic Canada is included as a credible research source, however, Walker’s main critique of Jenness is that his translation gives the impression that shamans are always male, which she emphatically denounces as incorrect.²⁷ She counters with explaining that the proper translation of the Inuit language would refer to “people” in a gender-neutral way rather than defaulting to “men”. Similar objections to and corrections of assumptions made by traditional, androcentric scholarship can be found in *The Woman in the Shaman’s Body: Reclaiming the Feminine in Religion and Medicine* by Barbara Tedlock, Ph.D.

Gender and Shamanism

Anthropologist Barbara Tedlock, who is an initiated shaman by K’iche’ Maya of highland Guatemala, writes extensively about the long hidden female roots of shamanism and medicine. She reinterprets generations of scholarship relying on evidence she garnered from her years of

²⁵ Ibid. 45.

²⁶ Ibid. 43.

²⁷ Ibid. 44.

field work with her husband. Her book, *The Woman in the Shaman's Body: Reclaiming the Feminine in Religion and Medicine*, is a thorough overview of the history of shamanism with women as the protagonists of the narrative. Tedlock argues that shamanism is the oldest spiritual healing tradition still in general use today.²⁸ Clearly, she has honed how to function in both the academic field and in the spiritual realms as a healer. Tedlock is also very sensitive to the nuances of the fluidity of gender identity during ritual performance. Shamans shift personas, cross dress, travel through alternate realities, interact and fuse with spirits of animals and non-human entities. "By reestablishing emotional and spiritual equilibrium a shaman strengthens the self-healing abilities of the patient. Research has shown that the use of songs, chants, prayers, spells, and music produce emotional states ...that affect the way the immune system responds to illness."²⁹ Tedlock discusses how female shamanism was eclipsed due to the linguistics of translation and common assumptions about the roles of women.³⁰ Aided by new technology such as chemical analysis of the mitochondrial DNA that comes from the female line, accurate sexing of human bones has begun to occur.³¹ She carefully traces the deficiencies of the normative narration stemming from the work of religious studies scholar Mircea Eliade. His book, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, has been regarded as a "definitive" treatise on shamanism. Tedlock doesn't hesitate to reveal that Eliade never actually met a shaman, never did any field work, and relied on the work of others which she ably critiques as well. She brings new insights into the archaeological and historical record and demonstrates that reclaiming hidden portions of women's history is possible. This innovation synergistically resonates with the

²⁸ Barbara Tedlock, *The Woman in the Shaman's Body: Reclaiming the Feminine in Religion and Medicine* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), 14-15.

²⁹ Ibid. 15.

³⁰ Ibid. 23.

³¹ Ibid. 30.

concept of portals to the “unprecedented” regarding musical experience for women in prehistory. The historical narrative of women in music has much to gain from the persistence of dedicated people, specifically and especially from the contributions of Max Dashu.

Max Dashu is a distinguished women’s studies scholar whose two disc DVD set, *Woman Shaman: The Ancients*, consists of a remarkable mosaic of images of artifacts depicting female shamans from numerous cultures separated by geographical distance and chronological time frames. Dashu’s collection of objects provides concrete evidence to support her argument that certain kinds of images and information have been screened out by cultural gatekeepers. Dashu states that portions of history have been suppressed, especially women’s history which she challenges. She redresses this glaring omission that she has exposed through the achievements of decades of research work. Theoretically, Dashu could be described as a structuralist. She utilizes a broad comparative perspective highlighting similarities that transcend known patterns of historical relationship or cultural diffusion and yet, is most struck by their thematic resemblances.³² She stresses the importance of signs to cultures based on oral tradition and how they convey meaning on multiple levels and that “when the transmission of the orature has been interrupted or severed, signs remain as primary testimony to the cultural life of ancient cultures.”³³ Dashu continues to publish her ongoing research and lecture around the world.

Still Contemplating

“Music, more than any other means of expression, bridges the rational and the intuitive, the individual and collective experience, and the physical and the metaphysical realms of our

³² Dashu, Max. “Icons of the Matrix.” *Suppressed Histories.net*. Accessed December 07, 2014. <http://www.suppressed.net/articles/priestesses.html>.

³³ *Ibid.*

existence.”³⁴ Without question, women have always participated in this means of expression, however, the telling of the tale of women in music has yet to be told on their own terms. When thinking about prehistory, the conflation of the sacred and secular creates an importantly different lens through which music is perceived. The role of the shaman emerges as one viable arena of musicality that women can embrace. Hypothetically it could serve as a more suitable context to begin with in constructing a new orientation of the story of women in music. From this vantage point, the educational institutions’ version of music where it is packaged as a rational, masculine, and elitist endeavor would have to surrender its dominant grip which is indeed an exciting scenario about which to ponder.

³⁴ Walker, “Music as Knowledge”, 47.

Bibliography

- Beck, Guy L. *Sacred Sound: Experiencing Music in World Religions*. Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 2006.
- Collins, Michelle. "'Divine madness' and collective grief: ritualized sounds and the potential for transformation." <https://www.inter-disciplinary.net/probing-the-boundaries/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/collinstsb4paper.pdf>
- Dashu, Max. "Icons of the Matrix." *Suppressed Histories.net*. Accessed December 07, 2014. <http://www.suppressed.net/articles/priestesses.html>.
- _____. *Woman Shaman: The Ancients*. DVD. Directed by Max Dashu. 2010; Oakland, CA: Suppressed Histories Archives, 2014.
- DuBois, Thomas Andrew. *An introduction to shamanism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Lewis, Rachel. "What's Queer about Musicology Now?" *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 13, no.1 (2009):43-53.
- Morley, Iain. "Conceiving Music in Prehistory." In *The Prehistory of Music: Human Evolution, Archaeology, and the Origins of Musicality*. 1-15. Oxford University Press, 2013.
- _____. "Conclusions". In *The Prehistory of Music: Human Evolution, Archaeology, and the Origins of Musicality*. 307-325. Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Ospanov, Aisulu, and Akbota Ivanov. "Music as a World Leader Communication System." (2014).
- Ränk, Gustav. "Shamanism as a Research Subject: Some Methodological Viewpoints." *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 1 (2014): 15-22.
- Raphael, Melissa. "Feminism, Constructivism and Numinous Experience." *Religious Studies* 30, no. 04 (1994): 511-526.
- Sylvan, Robin. *Traces of the spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music*. NYU Press, 2002.
- Tedlock, Barbara. *The Woman in the Shaman's Body: Reclaiming the Feminine in Religion and Medicine*. Bantam, 2009.
- Walker, Marilyn. "Music as Knowledge in Shamanism and Other Healing Traditions of Siberia." *Arctic Anthropology* 40, no. 2 (2003): 40-48.