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## BOYS ON THE OUTER: THEMES IN MALE ENGAGEMENT WITH MUSIC

*This paper examines the cause of exclusionary practices in music, documenting the core values that underpin this issue in relation to males' engagement with music. The focus for the paper is on the way in which gender has been one of the primary principles for the exclusion of boys, based on presumptions without foundation except in the erroneous hegemonic stereotypical images that prevail in social institutions such as schools. Through historical investigation of philosophy and practice combined with results from interviews with participants, the study reveals experiences in relation to gender-based exclusion from music. It concludes by offering an insight into approaches that deal with addressing this issue.*

**Keywords:** music, gender role rigidity, exclusion, heterosexism

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This paper seeks to expose some of the reasons boys are excluded from certain musical activities in schools. Taking a critical *genderist* framework, founded in post-feminist thought, the paper addresses the question: *what are the causes and affects of boys' engagement in gender-incongruent musical activities?* After positioning the author's approach and method, the voices of young men are employed to describe their interactions with music. These are analysed, and the paper concludes with suggestions for inclusive practices in school settings.

To begin with, some defining of terms: sex, sexuality and gender are frequently used in error and, in some cases, interchangeably. For ten years or more, gender researchers have followed in the footsteps of Karlberg (2001) in questioning whether "biological categories of sex 'translate into cultural categories of gender'" (p. 646). In the context of this paper, *sex* is described as being biologically male and/or female. *Sexuality* is the preference for male and/or female partners while *gender* refers to the societal expectations associated with being male or female, i.e. masculinity and femininity. These categories are independent yet related: males may exhibit feminine attributes just as females may possess masculine qualities. A further influence is the role of sexuality: for example, males who exhibit feminine attributes are often labeled as ho-

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mosexual, though there is no causal link between being male, feminine and homosexual. These definitions become critical when boys are the subject of heterosexist taunts because they of the musical instrument they play. In this situation, their biological sex is not congruent with their gendered performance, and therefore their sexuality may be brought into question.

### Philosophical Framework

To provide some background into the interplay of these three concepts in relation to music education, a brief summary of the main trends follows. While research into gender issues in music education began in earnest in the 1960s, the existence of exclusionary pedagogical practices in gendered musical participation has been documented over a more extended period. The article “Is the musical idea masculine” appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Brower 1894). Referring to the music of Charles Ives from the early 1900s, Wilkinson (1986, p.103) claimed that Ives attempted to debunk “sissy” types of music while Koza (1993) examined gender issues in music education as evidenced in the Music Supervisors’ Journal between 1914 and 1924. By the late 1950s, Kunst (1958) had established that gender association with instruments was a common sociological phenomenon. Through the rise of feminism in the 1960s, gender took its place alongside race, age and social class as one of the organising principles of social life (Kimmel and Messner, 1995). As gender became recognised as one of the central mechanisms through which power and resources are controlled in Western society, music’s contribution to social order came under scrutiny from researchers. Initially, studies referred to the sex-stereotyping of instruments (Abeles and Porter, 1978; Griswold and Chrobak, 1981; Delzell and Leppla, 1992). Pucciani (1983) claimed that stereotyping in music was two dimensional: it discriminates against boys and girls: boys are discouraged from playing the violin or pursuing elementary teaching careers, girls are discouraged from playing the trombone or pursuing careers in composing. Subsequent research by Lamb (1990), Koza (1993, 1994), Green (1996), and Hanley (1998) provided a foundation for many researchers in pursuing the social significance of sex.

Since the early 1990s, gender research in music education has been increasingly dominated by feminist theory, and has moved away from broader issues of gender to focus on issues of girls’ and women’s needs and experiences in music education. The origins of the shift can be found in the work of LeFanu (1987), Herndon (1990) and McClary (1991). LeFanu (1987) challenged the patriarchal hold on music through her compositions and academic comment. In *Master Musician: Impregnable Taboo*, she commented: “Patriarchy is bad for men...people who choose to live their lives as creative artists tend to be androgynous...rigid stereotypes will not allow us to develop...balanced culture” (p.7). Despite the intentions of these pioneers to engender balance, some recent writing demonstrates the subordinate place of gender studies to feminist studies. In *Feminism, Feminist Research, and Gender Research in Music Education: A Selective Review*, Lamb, Dolloff and Howe (2002) connect the term “femi-

nist” to “theory,” “studies” and “education,” while the term “gender” does not enjoy the same status. As a researcher embarking on gender studies as a field of enquiry in music relation to music education, the logical position for this author was that the area should include any studies of gender, including studies of femininity, masculinity and male gender issues. As such, the call for interrelating philosophy and practice seemed to this author to be an urgent one:

As an academic community, there is a responsibility to provide a strong philosophical background and informed leadership.... As practicing music educators the challenge is to examine attitudes.... Research and practice must interact to resolve these issues for the sake of boys and girls involved (or not involved) in fully experiencing music. (Harrison, 2003 p. 7)

In the pursuit of a suitable framework, Adler and Harrison (2004) proposed that a post-feminist construct was required for examining issues of gender in music and posited the adoption of “critical *genderist* thinking and action” (Adler, 2003). This model describes the process of examining issues of gender across the entire spectrum because, as Harrison (2005, p. 128) states, “To have this division within the ranks of gender research in music education helps us to envision nothing.”

### The Nature of Gendered Participation in Music

An understanding of the extent to which gendered participation exists in the musical practices of today is informed by the philosophies of the past century, and the practical realities of involvement in specific activities. As part of an ongoing enquiry into this field, Harrison (2005) conducted a limited literature review of research that investigated either stereotypical behaviours associated with instrument choice and/or gendered participation in music. Across eleven studies undertaken between 1978 and 2003, gendered participation in music can be summarised as:

- Flute was on the feminine end of the scale in ten out of the eleven studies;
- Clarinet and violin were either second or third most feminine in eight out of eleven studies;
- Tuba was the most masculine in every study in which it was an option;
- Drums/percussion were the most masculine in five of the studies;
- Trumpet, trombone, drums and other lower brass were deemed masculine;
- Saxophone was consistently neutral;
- Singing was at feminine end in all the studies in which it was an option.

In subsequent iterations of this research, a series of continuums were constructed (Harrison 2005). In three studies, conducted with primary (elementary), secondary and tertiary students respectively, a consistency of instrument preferences was apparent. Flute, clarinet and singing were at the feminine end of the spectrum (and were played

by females in the primary and secondary settings) while trumpet, tuba and percussion were almost exclusively in the male domain. Some exceptions were evident: slightly more primary and secondary girls preferred percussion, and trombone was neutral in the primary setting i.e. played almost equally by girls and boys.

One of the trends to emerge from the data is that larger, lower instruments and to a lesser extent, those with the capacity for higher dynamic levels were male dominated. Conversely, softer, smaller and higher instruments were female dominated. This would concur with the earlier findings of Bruce and Kemp (1995), and Zhukov (2006).

While this is of interest, the reasons behind these conclusions are of far greater import for educators wanting to engage in approaches that address pedagogies that are inclusive. The literature presented for analysis here provides some of the background to a practical approach to this situation. Specifically in music, Herndon (1990) stated:

All human groups take note of biological differences between men and women. Upon these facts, societies construct cultural “realities” or gender roles. Gender roles assign duties; define proper actions and a basic, if not arbitrary matrix for social interaction. Gender concepts limit and shape both men’s and women’s musical activities: it cannot be said that women’s voices, instruments or musical status is always subordinate to men. (p. 254)

Whilst gender concepts observed in social institutions are addressed in the literature that documents the historical and cultural origins of the phenomena, there is a clear lack of attention to these problems in school and community settings. Green’s (1993) observations of how both boys and girls are disadvantaged by the gender order succinctly capture the reality of the classroom and rehearsal environment:

...both boys and girls tended to restrict themselves or find themselves restricted to certain musical activities for fear of intruding into the other sex’s territory, where they may have been accused of some sort of musical transvestism. (p. 248)

Green also referred to the idea that women are disadvantaged in almost every musical experience, at the same time acknowledging that boys could be disadvantaged in school music education, largely as a result of their inability to cross gender lines. This notion of the restriction of male gender role development and expression, brought about through a lack of ability to experience femininity as much as females experience masculinity, is discussed by Archer (1993) and developed by Pollack (1999) who refers to this as gender straight-jacketing: boys are ashamed to express signs of neediness, dependence, sadness or vulnerability. In music, there is further evidence to support the notion of females crossing gender lines more easily than males in Conway’s (2000) work:

All of the students who were asked whether or not they would allow a daughter of theirs in 20 years to play a low brass instrument re-

sponded that the child should play what ever she would like. When asked that same question in regards to a son playing the flute, many of the students expressed concern about the teasing that child might experience. (p.13)

The place of flute and other high-pitched instruments present a cause for concern in the literature and in practice for music educators. Some of the comments from Conway's (2000) participants in relation to flute include: "I probably would not have started on the flute even if I liked it 'cause I knew it was really a girl thing" and "... I just can't see a guy picking up the flute; it's like such a feminine instrument. It sounds feminine, too." Similarly, at the other end of the masculine—feminine continuum, Conway's subjects commented on brass in this way: "I thought that low brass is sort of masculine, but it's not really true at our school, we do have some girls" (pp. 8-9).

Therefore, despite the significant research of the last 100 years into the sex stereotyping of musical instruments, stereotyping continues to occur, as recently summarised here by Hall (2005) and Harrison (2007):

Hegemonic masculinity is evident in the boys' engagement with a masculine/feminine dualism and in the belief that males are supposed to play certain instruments, those that are big, loud or low. (Hall 2005, p. 12)

... almost no boys [are] singing in a co-educational environment; small numbers of boys playing flute and other so-called "feminine" instruments. Similarly, girls' lack of participation in lower brass and percussion and in popular music is evident in schools and professional environments (Harrison, 2007)

The resistance to change, despite the extensive research, is due to the embedding of exclusion in western culture mores, bourn out in government policy, school documentation and learner-teacher interactions. Philosophy, theory and policy need to translate into practice, bringing about change through teacher education, curriculum change and action in classrooms, studios and ensembles. The fieldwork reported on in this paper therefore sought to interrogate the experiences of boys in Australian schools and to investigate the underlying reasons for their modes of participation. This is an under-researched field in the antipodes, and one that affects not only musical involvement but also schooling at large.

## The Present Study

### *Method*

The methodology employed for this study is founded on qualitative facets of research (Hemingway & Gough, 2000, p. 167). The foundation of the research in a qual-

itative framework is supported by the philosophy of Dewey (1938) who referred to the conflict between scientists who aim to *state* meaning and artists who aim to *express* meaning. The emphasis on expression and its inherent difficulties in research terms were noted by Flinders and Richardson (2002) who claimed that, within the next 10 years,

[q]ualitative studies will yield insights that have parallels with the insights gained from music experiences, for both can be powerful, emotion-laden and difficult to put into words. (p. 1169)

Specifically, interviews were selected for the research being reported here. Frey and Mertens-Oshi (1995) define an interview as “a purposeful conversation in which one person asks prepared questions (interviewer) and another answers them (respondent)” (p. 1). *Maximum variation sampling* was used to select the participants for the interviews as it enabled the identification of “common patterns across great variation” (Glesne, 1999, p. 29). Participants were selected to represent varied teaching and learning experiences: schools in primary, secondary, co-educational, single-sex, private and public settings along with private studios and community ensembles.

As part of a larger study, perceptions of school students, tertiary students, teachers and community music makers were obtained for the purpose of informing inclusive music education practices. The context is Queensland, Australia. The cohort described here represents only first of these: school students who had completed their education in single-sex, co-educational, private and public schools. Twenty-one students were asked to reflect on their experiences of music, with particular reference to gendered participation in music. The interviews were open and semi-structured, and the types of questions asked in the interviews related to participants’ experience of:

- Music in school in the broadest sense,
- Stereotyping of instruments,
- Bullying (specifically heterosexist bullying) of musicians,
- Situational factors that affected musical preferences including the role of teachers and environment.

The author conducted the interviews, which generally lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. Most interviews were undertaken face-to-face at the author’s workplace, though a small number [4] were conducted over the telephone.

On completion of the data-gathering phase, the interview data were transcribed for “further comparative examination” (Bartel, p. 360), meaning that they were compared with each other and with the literature. The integrity of the data was maintained and the tendency to “dissolve all complexity” (Shenk, 1997, p. 157) was avoided through the following measures:

- Transcripts were forwarded to participants for verification of the accuracy of the content. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)

- The responses were collated and analysed to find similar themes and trends. Ways in which the responses differed radically from each other and the factors that may have contributed to those differences were also noted.
- The data were subjected to content analysis (Cavana, Delahaye, & Sekaran, 2001) to relate it to the literature and identify themes, concepts and meanings (Burns, 2000).

There is no intention in the research to hold the responses as “truth” rather as “accounts.” These accounts are a product of the time and place in which they are made and, if the same question was asked again at a different time, in a different place, it is acknowledged that the answer could be different. Wherever feasible, detailed quotes have been included to illustrate the argument and to ensure responses are not quoted out of context. Using a technique employed by Plummer (1999) and Green (1997), more than one quote has been included in instances when different candidates have given similar responses to each issue. The meanings of these quotes are related to the existing literature outlined above. One of the reasons for providing such a detailed account of the literature is to make clear and valid connections between the current findings and research to date.

### Findings

In discussing the experience of music at school with young men, a number of factors designed to bring about positive experiences for school students were highlighted in the study. The strongest theme (in terms of frequency [ $n = 19$ ] and length of response) was connected to the stage at which gender needs to be addressed, as found in the literature (Freer, 2006 and Hall, 2005) and evidenced Maurice’s comments:

*Maurice:* Then came high school in 1988. It was no longer ‘cool’ to do music. From the moment I started high school in 1988 to the year I finished, came the taunting. The name-calling started. Poofter, Fag-got, Queer. You name it, I copped it!

Green (1996) and Harrison (2001) noted that to perform certain styles of music could bring credit and reduce the exclusion from socialisation through bullying. This was certainly the case in relation to performing music theatre and pop. In the fieldwork, Gerard’s comments succinctly reflect the perceptions expressed by the majority [ $n=16$ ] of responses. He noted that while there were homosexual associations with performing music theatre, his passion overcame this and his peers came to accept his desire to perform:

*Gerard:* In year 11 and 12 with school productions, suddenly music, acting and singing were accepted by the majority of students. I really loved the productions because I had been so lonely.

The stereotyping of instruments featured prominently in the participants' responses. Boys typically didn't engage with the instruments at the non-stereotypical end of the spectrum in the primary years. When they did choose non-stereotypical instruments, they frequently changed their mind. Twelve participants responded in a similar fashion to Kevin:

*Kevin:* When I reached grade 7 for some reason I decided to give it all up and let it all slide, for reasons unknown to me. I stopped practicing and stopped lessons ... I wanted a normal and enjoyable childhood. . I think this came from the pressures my parent's put on me as well as teachers, to succeed and be the best.

Like Maurice above, others who stuck with gender-incongruent musical activities were subject to significant heterosexist bullying. Instruments such as the flute and clarinet were referred to as "sissy," "girly" and "weak." Boys who played these instruments, and those who sang, were physically attacked and/or called names:

*Keith:* I had to persevere with a lot of nasty comments and rumours from most of the mainstream students and for a while I was alienated purely because I enjoyed singing.

Singing in a high voice was considered particularly un-masculine, even when the physiology prevented any alternate sound. Only a few participants [4] commented in the same way as Neville:

*Neville:* The ridicule was based mainly on the fact that my voice hadn't broken at that stage, and was particularly high. Performing in those situations did turn me off singing for many years.

While only four participants only noted this sentiment, the idea that boys stop singing at this time is contrary to effective singing pedagogy that states boys should sing through the change (Adler, 2001; Ashley, 2007; Harrison, 2007), and provides proof that boys are on the outer in this particular activity. Not all participants experienced this personally, though Peter noticed that

*Peter:* ...from observation, those who pursued music more heavily at school did receive quite a hard time about it.

In several cases ( $n = 17$ ), music teachers emerged as the saviour, the advocate or the champion in the interviews. Teachers who provided broad opportunities to students were particularly well regarded, as Gary noted:

*Gary:* During my time in high school I developed a great love of music and it soon became my greatest concern in life. Thanks mainly

to the music teachers at that time, we were given the opportunity to do and see things that your average student would not ... it was during this part of my life that I began thinking about continuing music as a full-time career.

Conversely, a number of negative comments (9) emerged about teachers who questioned the choice of music as a profession. This would appear to link to the concept of gender straight jacketing referred to by Archer (1993), Pollack (1999) and Conway (2000).

*Chris:* They [the teachers] tell you to stop dreaming or better still go and get a qualification and play music as a hobby. For whatever reason it is not really seen as a career option... if you teach music that is okay, but if you just want to play or perform then you are seen as a bum who just wants to sleep all day, live on the dole and not have any real direction in life.

Finally, the learning environment came under scrutiny from a couple of participants ( $n = 7$ ). Keith noted that his school “wasn’t a place for young male singers” while Stephen mentioned that

no matter how good your learning atmosphere is, or how good the bands are or how tough the musicians are, there will always be jerks because no system is foolproof.

The “system,” as Stephen calls it, appears to be letting boys down when it comes to participation in music. Schools therefore need to look towards more inclusive practices to ensure musical boys (and boys who are potentially musical) are not left on the outer.

#### Discussion: Toward Inclusive Practices

Adler (2001) proposes that to make music an experience that will have positive value involves “examining the issues of school policy, departmental and classroom management, teacher-student relations, peer relations and student self-esteem and self-image” (n.p.). The timing of such processes is critical. It is generally assumed that adolescence is the most problematic period, as Freer (2006) notes in relation to singing:

If we wish for singing and choral music to become part of the “self” of adolescent boys and girls, we must listen to the experiences of young adolescents as expressed through their words and stories. Then, we can reflect what we learn from them in our teaching and rehearsing as the culmination of a constantly renewing cycle of inquiry, theory, research, and practice. (p. 70)

On the contrary, Hall (2005) suggests that this occurs much earlier for boys:

Further research is needed that addresses how negative attitudes toward singing develop in some boys before five years of age, and considers how to deconstruct male stereotypes in the music classroom. (p. 17)

While the remarks of Freer and Hall refer specifically to boys' singing and are supported by the interview data above, the players of instruments such as clarinet, flute and harp would also benefit from the embedding of inclusive strategies at significant points throughout the lives of males and females. The academic community has a responsibility to find suitable frameworks that permit broad-based research into the field. The critical *genderist* viewpoint is posited as one way this can occur. This viewpoint is described by Adler and Harrison (2004) as

The process of examining issues of gender across the entire gender spectrum. It allows us to examine the experiences of individuals or groups while still valuing and understanding that those experiences do not negate the experiences of other individuals or groups, and while illuminating the interconnectedness of differing experience. (p. 274)

Furthermore, the critical *genderist* approach allows for both *thinking* and *action*, embracing philosophy and practice. In practical terms therefore, the findings from the interviews reported here note a number of strategies that disrupt exclusion and promote inclusion:

- Repertoire that caters to difference;
- A focus on student-centred learning and teaching;
- Incorporation of appropriate role models: teacher and peer;
- Awareness of stereotyping and counter-stereotyping;
- Addressing the significant transition periods in schooling.

Each of these strategies will now be explored in further detail, to highlight the approaches that may be taken to include boys.

### *Repertoire*

Choice of repertoire is one of the most difficult tasks a music teacher faces. There are limitations placed on the teacher by the school authority, religious conventions, and the abilities of the students. A small number of Australian repertoire studies have been undertaken (Harris, 2006; O'Bryan, 2008; Roulston, 2005). Of these only Harris (p. 24) pertains specifically to repertoire for boys and even then, the emphasis is on repertoire "geared to the vocal capabilities of students during each stage of the [voice]

change.” The repertoire suggested by Harris is pedagogically sound but lacks understanding of the sociological implications of singing certain lyrics and/or singing in a certain musical style. Furthermore, suggestions of sea-shanties and military songs can entrench rather than liberate stereotypical ideals. First and foremost, repertoire needs to be negotiated with the cohort, with lyrics and musical content carefully thought-through. Vocal repertoire almost certainly needs a rhythmic drive, a limited vocal range and an appealing message. Similarly instrumental music needs to have substance and appeal to the particular generation at hand.

### *Student-centred Approach*

A logical follow-on from negotiated repertoire is pedagogy that places the student in the centre. Participants, along with Freer (2006), noted that students like to be listened to and involved in the construction of their learning activities. Like all students, boys who are taken from the known to the unknown respond more readily to new ideas. Repertoire, as the subject knowledge in music, is the logical starting point but boys can also be involved in uniform choice, concert venue and programming format.

### *Role Models*

The notion of the role model, particularly in the early years, is a contested one. Bricheno and Thornton (2006) contend that the dearth of men in teaching does not necessarily contribute to a lack of achievement by boys. On the other hand, the data presented above does not focus on achievement, but indicates that both negative and positive roles can affect the participation of boys in music. Like other subject areas, a teacher who behaves as an advocate or champion has the capacity to attract students to the subject matter, engage them in learning experiences and provide opportunities both inside and outside the classroom environment. Similarly, peer learning has been to be enormously successful in music making (Green, 2002; Lebler, 2008) particularly in popular music. Peer learning is an under-researched area in music education and further investigation of the role of peers in boys’ music making in broader contexts is warranted.

### *Stereotyping and Counter-stereotyping*

The findings above indicate the continued presence of stereotyped musical activities in schools. Counter-stereotyping presents both a problem and a solution. Boys who undertake counter-stereotypical or gender incongruent activities can be subject to ridicule. The exceptions are when the boys are already high in status or represent critical mass. Boys who participate in sport do not experience the same mocking as those who do not (Harrison, 2003, 2005). Similarly, schools who report higher levels of musical involvement in music also note a greater sense of community, less bullying and higher academic achievement (Young, 2009). Achieving greater numbers of male in-

volvement with boys who are popular, well liked and enjoy high status can assist in overcoming the negative aspects of stereotyping.

### *Transitions*

Transition between schools has proven to be one of the more challenging times for boys in relation to music making (Harrison, 2001, 2003). The comments of Maurice, Gerard and Kevin above all focus on transition times in the Australian school system. The change from primary school to high school at around age 12 is the most awkward transition. This change in environment, accompanied by pubertal change that alters the sound of voice, is difficult to address. Collins (2009) notes that schools with a K-12 (Kindergarten to Year 12) set up are not as problematic. Similarly, schools with a focus on the middle years are able to manage this transition more smoothly (Mason, 2009). In Australia, the age of the change to high school is about to be lowered by one year, and the affect of this change will need to be monitored in relation to musical involvement in the coming years.

### Conclusions

Stereotypical and gendered practices in music education have a unique cultural and historical basis: a basis that is institutionally embedded and expressed in student's values, actions and practice. The critical *genderist* approach aims to increase participation for all, through both thinking and action. Regarding thinking, the theory examined here addresses where gender exclusion takes place but does not attempt to provide strategies to deal with specific cultural, institutional and individual teacher contexts. In terms of action, a checklist of strategies does not come close to providing a solution. This paper proposes a beginning point for practitioners who, with knowledge of the historical and philosophical underpinnings, can use the approaches described herein to bring about changes in structure, content and process to create an environment where awareness and effective teaching and learning for boys can take place.

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