Introduction

All human societies make social distinctions based on gender: for example, many societies label some work as ‘women’s work’ and some as ‘men’s work’, and in the domain of music some kinds of musical activities are deemed ‘female’ or ‘male’. Why should musical activities be gendered in this way? And what role does music have in the psychological sense of oneself as male or female? In this chapter, I present evidence for the role of music in the construction of gender identity. The approach adopted here which provides the explanatory framework for the research reported is a social constructionist perspective (although biological and cognitive approaches are also discussed briefly). Issues addressed in this chapter are the gendering of music as an activity, the gendering of musical practices and tastes, and the way in which musical texts may position the (gendered) subject.

Theories of gender identity and development

Accounts of gender have tended to draw a distinction between (biological) sex, on the one hand (a distinction between male and female, based on differences in chromosomes and the genitals), and socially constructed gender on the other (masculine and feminine, i.e. the characteristics and behaviour ascribed to each of the sexes). For many people, these categories (particularly sex and gender identity) map onto each other: for example, a biological male is likely to think of himself as a boy or a man (although not necessarily) but he may not have a masculine role (i.e. the norm of acceptable behaviour for males in a particular society). This distinction between sex and gender provides the basis for two main views of gender identity which are often framed in terms of the dual influences of biology and of socialization. A commonly accepted view is that biology and the environment interact and that it is this complex interaction which produces the phenomenon we experience; however, many different theoretical positions have been adopted to explain gender identity and development (for a review, see Turner, 1995) and I review some of these briefly here before discussing gender identity from the perspective of the social constructionist position.

The biological perspective maintains that gender characteristics are pre-given, and determined by biological sex; the idea, for example, that women’s biological role as
mothers makes them inherently more caring. One view of gender development is that biological factors predispose boys and girls to behave in certain ways and to have certain predispositions for learning. A number of hormonal explanations have been proposed: the action of sex hormones on the fetal brain producing brain specialization and later differences; the influence of sex hormones on our thinking and behaviour during adult life; and differences in brain maturation between boys and girls in later life. In addition, socio-biological accounts suggest that genetic and evolutionary factors give rise to gender differences and social organization. In broad terms, this is the idea that genes control human attributes (e.g. aggressiveness) and that the operation of natural and sexual selection has resulted in genetic predispositions of men towards aggression and of women towards nurturing. By basing gender identity on nature, specifically the physical body as the site which sets the boundary of who we are, identity is treated as fixed and transhistorical.

With the emergence of feminist theory in the 1970s, and anthropological and psychological data on the variability of gender roles and behaviour, the role of social factors became increasingly recognized. Feminist writers have been particularly resistant to biological accounts due to the determinism which seems to underlie them, and because they can be read as legitimizing male aggression and sexual exploitation of women as natural and desirable. The evidence for biological influences is equivocal: biological differences between the sexes are less than might be assumed (Kaplan and Rodgers, 1990), and where differences do exist society attaches far greater importance to them than is perhaps warranted (Birke, 1992). In addition, cross-cultural comparisons suggest that gender differences and divisions of labour are not the same in all societies, suggesting that socialization (the acquisition of culturally appropriate values and beliefs) may have a greater influence than biology (see Burr, 1998).

In broad terms, socialization theories suggest that most people develop a stable sense of gender identity in the first few years of life as a consequence of enculturation. Internalizing gender as part of one’s personality goes beyond knowing one is male or female—one argument is that as children grow up within a particular society, they undergo ‘gender typing’, i.e. they integrate culturally defined norms of what is gender-appropriate into their self-concept. Social learning theory applies behaviourist principles of learning to the acquisition of gender, and argues that children learn gendered behaviour from their environment by virtue of reinforcement, punishment and extinction of sex-inappropriate behaviour, and by exposure of boys and girls to different kinds of activities and role models (Mischel, 1970). This theory relies on the concept of ‘identification’: this is the idea that children spontaneously imitate behaviour without direct training or reward based on an intimate relationship with the person being imitated, although there is also evidence that children imitate adult models even when not directly reinforced for doing so—imitating models who are themselves reinforced (Bandura, 1977).

While the influence of these processes is generally accepted, psychologists question whether this alone is enough to account for gender typing. A second perspective on socialization emphasizes the role of the child’s awareness of their own gender identity. Cognitive–developmental theory (Kohlberg, 1966, 1969) argues that children’s attitudes and beliefs about gender roles guide their interaction with the environment, i.e. they
watch and imitate same-sex models because they are aware that that is what someone of the same sex as themselves does, and they come to value gender-appropriate aspects of themselves positively. From an early age, children categorize other people on the basis of social dimensions, of which gender is one of the first distinctions children make; however, there is evidence that children understand some things about sex and gender before others: by the age of 2 years, children can perform gender labelling (giving the correct gender label to a picture of a person) and are aware of their own gender identity (they can assign a picture of themselves to the correct gender category although they may believe that someone can change genders by changing their clothes or hair); by the age of about 3 years, children are aware of sex stereotypes concerning activities, thus children become aware of sex stereotypes of musical behaviours—both of real differences (such as the fact that the majority of drummers in pop groups are men) and of widely held beliefs (such as whether boys or girls should play which kinds of musical instrument). However, according to cognitive–developmental theory, it is not until the age of 6 or 7 years, with the understanding of gender constancy, that it is possible for motivations to emerge to adopt particular behaviours: once they know what they are, children turn to the cultural expectations for people of their own sex and come to value sex-appropriate behaviour. According to this perspective, identification is an outcome of gender typing, not a cause of it. (This theory is not universally accepted, however, because research does not support the idea that children become gender typed only after acquiring a sense of gender constancy.) Although it does not deny social learning theory, cognitive–developmental theory adds to it by suggesting that children socialize themselves to be masculine or feminine. The child models those who are like him or her self and who are high in prestige and competence, and external rewards and punishments are far less important from this perspective.

Underlying many of these socialization theories of gender development is the idea that although gender is not determined by biological sex, it is the social expression of the facts of biological sex difference. However, some critics increasingly doubt there are any core premises from which gender derives: recent research casts doubt on the idea of male/female as a biological absolute opposite and argues that it is a convenient social construct (Kaplan and Rodgers, 1990; Birke, 1992). Categories of sexual difference commonly thought of as immutable turn out to be changeable, and by social influences, not just medical ‘discoveries’ (Lacqueur, 1990). From classical antiquity to the end of the 17th century, Western popular belief and medical texts depicted a one-sex model of sexual characteristics in which female genitals were seen as an inverted, interior version of male genitals. By the 19th century, however, this view had been discarded in favour of the idea of unbridgeable sexual difference, driven not by new scientific discoveries, but by a need to counter women’s demands for full citizenship. From this perspective, the marking of sexual difference through dress, behaviour and a whole range of other domains, including music, is part of a continuing effort to sustain the social definition of gender—an effort that is necessary precisely because the biological differences cannot sustain the gender categories (Connell, 1987).

Instead, some theories draw attention to gender as a learnt phenomenon, and claim that gendered identities are produced by means of repetitions of ‘performatve’ (Butler, 1990) or ‘representational’ (de Lauretis, 1987) practices. This strand of gender theory
has been influenced by Foucault’s argument that sex is an effect, a product of discursive practices, rather than an origin. The idea of identity categories as effects of institutions, practices and discourses has been an important influence on gender theory over the last decade. In the words of Simone de Beauvoir (1988) ‘one is not born a woman but becomes one’, moreover, one is under a cultural compulsion to become a man or a woman (what she refers to as the ‘imaginable domain of gender’). Judith Butler goes even further in her critique arguing that not only is sex as culturally constructed as gender, but that there may be no distinction between sex and gender at all (Butler, 1990, p. 7).

According to Butler, what produces the phenomenon of ‘natural sex’—the apparently natural correlation of bodies with sexes—is the ‘sedimentation’ of gender norms. In addition, because, according to this view, there is no essence that gender expresses, nor an objective ideal to which it aspires, the acts of gender create the idea of gender:

... gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed... There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results. (Butler, 1990, p. 25)

The ‘performative’ view of gender is congruent with social-constructionist views of identity in which identity is something we do rather than something we are (see O’Neill, Chapter 5, this volume). According to this account, language and all symbolic systems provide the concepts with which we think, and our understanding of the world is socially constructed through our interactions. For example, Widdicombe and Woofitt ‘...view identities as achieved; not fixed but negotiated products of the ongoing flow of interaction’ (Widdicombe and Woofitt, 1995, p. 131).

Through the existence of differences in the kinds of musical behaviours men and women engage in, it is possible to see how music might feasibly play a role in gender development and maintenance. From a biological perspective, differences in male and female aptitudes for music and musical behaviours are a result of biological differences. From the perspective of socialization, music may offer models of culturally appropriate male and female behaviour which act as the basis for imitation and modelling. From the perspective of ‘performative’ theories of gender, engagement in musical practices may construct and sustain individual or collective identity. It is this last perspective which is explored in the rest of the chapter. I first consider the way in which gender identity is developed and 'performed' through music in these ways, including participation in musical performance and composition, musical tastes and preferences, and collecting, before considering the kinds of gendered representations which music offers.

Musical practices and the construction of gender identity

An observable feature of gender identity is that men and women engage in different kinds of behaviours and activities and are represented in very different ways: for example, in Western culture, women are often portrayed as passive in relation to active male characters, they are shown engaging in a far narrower range of activities than men, and are situated in the domestic rather than the public sphere. These gender roles are also observable in musical behaviour, beliefs and preferences. There is a huge literature on
the gender typing of musical practices; therefore, the following gives some illustrative examples rather than a comprehensive overview.

The gendering of music

Within a Western culture structured in terms of a mind–body split, music’s appeal to the body predisposes it to be assigned to the feminine. Indeed, feminist scholars have argued that male musicians have compensated for this by emphasizing the rational in music, claiming objectivity and transcendence for it, and prohibiting female participation (McClary, 1991). However, as Richards has argued, one should not essentialize music as feminine or physical, but should consider music as a phenomenon ‘which is remade with divergent meanings in its inscription within particular discourses’ (Richards, 1998, p. 165). In other words, generalized cultural polarities are useless in understanding taste choices, or the gendering of musical participation; specification is needed of the social relations of particular contexts. It is therefore necessary to look at the way in which gender is enacted in particular musical, historical and cultural contexts.

The gender typing of musical performance and composition

Historically, musical participation has been differentiated by gender: for example, women are largely absent from historical accounts of Western European art music (although not from others; see Koskoff, 1987). Although part of this is a bias in the way in which history has been written (over the past two decades one branch of musicological research has sought to rectify this through compensatory music history; e.g. Neuls-Bates, 1982; Pendle, 1991; Marshall, 1993; Fuller, 1994), it is true that women have been largely absent from many of the more professionalized aspects of European art music composition and performance, having been denied musical training in all but the most domesticated forms of music-making and facilitated in those most affirmative of a patriarchal construction of femininity (Citron, 1993; Green, 1997; Bayton, 1998). For example, women’s involvement in domestic music-making in the 18th century (such as playing keyboards as an accompaniment to singing) is congruent with women’s association with the private rather than public spheres; and the association of women with nature and the body has made singing a more acceptable activity than some other instruments more associated with technology. Although participation in music in Western cultures is now apparently equally available to men and women, large discrepancies still exist in the extent to which different kinds of musical activities are engaged in. Distinctions between the kinds of musical practices men and women engage in also exist in many other cultures (Koskoff, 1987). In this section, I review some of the evidence for gender roles in music and the way in which they participate in the construction of gender identity.

One area of study of the operation of gendered musical practices and meanings has been in the school music classroom. In her book *Music, Gender, Education*, Lucy Green uses the school music classroom to illuminate processes involved in the construction of gender identity through musical participation, beliefs and preferences. Using questionnaires, interviews and observation, Green found a number of widely held beliefs about the gender-appropriateness of musical practices: according to teachers, girls were more
successful at singing (a belief which agreed with pupil’s perceptions), girls were more active as instrumentalists and more involved in classical music, and girls’ attitudes were understood by teachers as linked to ‘expressivity’, ‘decoration’ and ‘delicacy’ (Green, 1997, pp. 151–152). Girls were also seen by both pupils and teachers to lack the necessary abilities for composition—a lack which constitutes their femininity. Green argues that boys and girls ‘experience their own music as a reflection and legitimation of their own gender identities’ (Green, 1997, p. 229), thus boys presented themselves as more positive about their own composition, and positioned their own work positively in relation to others.

As Green notes, girls are not just learning music but negotiating a gender identity, and classical music in school provides an affirmation of gender for girls in the form of a safe and private form of display. For example, studies of preference of music and musical activities among school children have found that while positive attitudes towards music increase with age, girls report more positive attitudes and competence beliefs towards music than boys (Crowther and Durkin, 1982; Eccles et al., 1993), a finding which agrees with Green’s study of attitudes to music in school (Green, 1997). Research suggests that music in school generally is regarded as a ‘feminine’ subject (Boldizar, 1991), although this appears to be changing due to the introduction of music technology into classroom music-making: the performance of popular music involves drums, electronic instruments, and interrupts femininity, which provides a space for masculinity (Comber et al., 1993).

One of the domains in which gender beliefs can be seen to operate most powerfully is in the gender stereotyping of musical instruments (for a review, see O’Neill, 1997). Research has found that children and adolescents stereotype musical instruments as either ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’, and that children display sex differences in their instrumental choices (Crowther and Durkin, 1982) and preferences (Abeles and Porter, 1978). Studies of the kinds of instruments boys and girls (age 9–10 years) would like to play found gender differences, with boys preferring drums, guitar and trumpet, and girls preferring flute, piano and violin (O’Neill and Boulton, 1996). Preferences for musical instruments show age-related differences in gender stereotyping: younger children (age 5 years) showed no differences in the extent to which they preferred instruments viewed by adults as masculine or feminine, whereas older children (age 10 years) showed a marked gender difference (Abeles and Porter, 1978). Research also suggests that boys have a narrower range of ‘appropriate’ instruments from which to select than girls (Delzell and Leppla, 1992; O’Neill and Boulton, 1996). There is also evidence that parents may encourage their children to choose instruments on the basis of gender stereotypes (Abeles and Porter, 1978).

Children’s gender-stereotyped beliefs about musical instruments (and behaviour) have been interpreted within the framework of gender typing, i.e. that these stereotypes form part of gender role development. This kind of behaviour shows that boys are engaging in an avoidance of femininity (O’Neill, 1997)—the equivalent of which (avoidance of masculinity) girls engage in at a later age (Hill and Lynch, 1982). Indeed, Green reports that secondary school teachers interviewed about children’s involvement in musical activities in school observed both boys and girls engaging in a restriction of musical activities to gender-stereotyped behaviour (Green, 1993). A consequence of
gender boundary violation is that children are far less popular with their peers (O’Neill and Boulton, 1995), thus there is reason to think that social forces are at work affirming this stereotyping. There is some evidence that gender models can be used to overcome gender stereotyping in music but, although these stereotypes seem amenable to change, interventions do not seem to have a lasting effect (O’Neill, 1997).

Evidence from other cultures shows other processes at work in determining children’s involvement in music. In his study of Bulgarian music of the 1930s, Rice (1994) points out that gender was one of the most important factors in determining the acquisition of musical skills. While most boys had the opportunity to learn simple instruments such as the shepherd’s flute while herding animals, girls were learning domestic skills in the home such as cooking, sewing and weaving, which meant they did not have free hands. Instead, girls sang while they worked, learning songs from the other female family members as they learnt ‘female’ skills. Rice observes that performance style and the issues dealt with in songs also differed by gender: in particular, the cultural expectation for women to behave with modesty and deference towards men discouraged women from singing in public, and from the explicit displays of improvisation and creativity, which men engaged in more frequently.

Another example is Sugarman’s study of Prespa Albanian wedding celebrations (1977). Sugarman argues that Prespa Albanians believe women and men to have different ‘natures’ and therefore their singing styles are expected to be different. In addition, because they have different roles within the family and community, they are also expected to have different roles as singers and to address different themes within the songs. The activities around these weddings are segregated by gender, as are the song repertoires and performance styles. The polyphonic songs are structured around three vocal lines which move around the same pitch collection, and which therefore require voices with roughly similar tessituras. Women’s singing is nasal and muted, as appropriate to an intimate, indoor setting, and is described as ‘thin’ by the Prespa Albanians. Men, on the other hand, are said to sing with a ‘thick’ voice (not nasal), a quality associated with the voices of young men, and understood as indicative of strength and virility suitable to the heroic themes of some of the song texts. Whereas there are only two main categories of women’s songs, men’s songs deal with a much wider range of themes. These examples illustrate the way in which gender can determine the acquisition and display of musical skills, and also the way in which music articulates gender differences which are part of the larger social organization of a community.

Musical taste and gender identity

Taste in music (musical consumption) is viewed within Western culture as personal and as an important way in which we define ourselves and others, because music is culturally positioned as an expressive and affective medium. However, taste is not ‘natural’ or ‘innocent’, but central to the way in which people define themselves. Essentially, this view involves a shift from thinking of consumption as the utilitarian fulfillment of needs to consumption as identity construction. Following Bourdieu (1984), the role of taste has been theorized not as ‘natural’ or ‘personal’ but as a means by which social distinctions are made (e.g. Frith, 1983; Shepherd, 1991; Richards, 1998).
Studies of musical consumption show clear patterns of gender- and age-based genre preferences (for reviews, see Russell, 1997; Zillman and Gan, 1997). For example, studies of American and British music consumption reveal the importance of dancing (discos and clubs) for women as opposed to men. Dancing is the only out-of-home leisure activity that women engage in more than men (who are more likely to attend a sporting event, attend live concerts and visit the cinema; Central Statistical Office General Household Surveys 1972–1986, cited in Thornton, 1995, p. 103). A preference for ‘love songs’, romantic popular music and dancing exhibited by young girls has been attributed to an emphasis within female culture on finding a husband and establishing a home (Frith, 1983; McRobbie, 2000).

Distinctions between male and female musical tastes can be interpreted in terms of the maintenance of a positive social identity. Drawing on social identity theory, Tarrant et al. (Chapter 8, this volume) argue that the social context in which affiliation with music takes place for adolescents is of central importance: musical preference is an important factor in in-group and out-group membership, for self-esteem and for the maintenance of a positive social identity. According to this perspective, affiliation of groups with particular genres means adolescents associate those groups with the ‘meta-information’ which that affiliation activates. The music provides extra-musical information on which social judgements are made, and this information is used to form a positive evaluation of an adolescent’s own group in order to maintain a positive social identity. Although at a local level, musical tastes may provide a means for males and females to maintain positive social identities, one implication of this perspective is that it may be difficult for females to maintain a positive social identity through music viewed from a larger social perspective. For example, the musical tastes of females are often decried by the media: in the UK, young girls’ fandom of boy and girl bands is ridiculed and the bands are criticized for ‘artificiality’ and ‘banality’ and juxtaposed to the ‘authenticity’ of rock (perceived as a male domain). Within this larger social context, it may be difficult for female tastes to affirm a positive social identity since the access to power and resources to define value in the public realm is held primarily by males.

Like Green (1997), Richards’ study of adolescents’ musical tastes found that boys and girls differentiate themselves in terms of musical preferences. Significantly, however, Richards argues that the difference between boys and girls was in how they spoke about their engagement in music rather than the type of music they listened to. Richards argues for the ‘need to consider tastes in music as features of discourse rather than in terms of a more abstracted relationship between the formal characteristics of music and particular subjectivities’ (Richards, 1998, p. 172). Both girls and boys were unwilling to invest in fixed taste positions (a strategy commensurate with the need in adolescence to keep tastes and identities mobile) and were only willing to engage in fixing when it was to avoid being attributed with musical tastes which interrupted traditional gender roles.

There is further evidence from ethnographic studies that music’s role in identity construction is influenced by social context. For example, Koizumi found that the way in which the gendered meanings of popular music were used by Japanese high school students differed over different contexts (Koizumi, 1999). In formal sites (i.e. a school context), both female and male pupils attempted to conceal their own favourite music, but used different strategies to do so: whereas male pupils subordinated their favourite
music to perceived peer tastes, female pupils either mentioned ‘safe’ artists in the classroom only, or spoke ambiguously to conceal their favourite music. In a semi-formal site (a High School band event), males were much more willing to talk about their own music, even though the music actually performed in the event included conventional and conformant messages. Koizumi argues that in the informal site, pupils no longer needed to worry about the judgements of others and so in this setting engaged in different musical behaviours: for example, the girls participated in music in a way which emphasized physicality (an aspect which is less evident in school settings due to the exclusion of dance from the school curriculum). Empirical research has shown that the preferences expressed by young people change according to the particular social context they are in at any time, highlighting the inappropriateness of attributing any sort of fixity to notions of identity and highlighting the role of musical preference in self-presentation (Finnäs, 1989; Richards, 1998; Koizumi, 1999). These studies highlight the way in which a sense of self arises from social interaction through music, differs according to social context and depends on language—evidence congruent with the social constructionist position (Burr, 1995).

Music, remembering and collecting

One of the primary uses of music which people engage in is that for memory retrieval: remembering key people in their lives, using an associated piece of music to relive an event or emotionally critical moment from the past—often a relationship—and more generally using music as a means of self-recording (as with photographs, diaries, souvenirs and collecting). An ethnographic study by DeNora on the use of music in the lives of British and American women found that music was a significant resource in women’s remembering and emotional life (DeNora, 2000, pp. 66–74). Given the masculine stereotype of men’s lesser emotional expressivity, one might expect men to report fewer uses of music in this way. Indeed, a study by Christenson and Peterson found that their women participants more frequently described their use of music in terms of ‘secondary’ (sic) uses (e.g. in order to improve mood, as a background activity, etc.) and they conclude by drawing a distinction between men’s use of music as ‘central and personal’ and women’s as ‘instrumental and social’ (Christenson and Peterson, 1988, p. 299). Using music to achieve what you ‘need’ is a common way in which people speak about their uses of music for relaxation, for example ‘needing’ to hear one particular piece of music at a particular moment rather than another. It is not only the use of music in this way which is ‘identity work’ but the way in which people talk about their ‘needs’: it is a ‘discourse of the self’—a way of creating the self as something we have knowledge into and about (DeNora, 2000).

There is a small amount of evidence that music collecting behaviours are gendered. For example, adolescent boys report spending more money on recordings and hi-fi equipment than do girls (Richards, 1998), and there is some evidence that boys enjoy opportunities to display the quantity and sometimes the range of their collections to a greater extent (Thornton, 1995; Richards, 1998). As with other forms of collecting, record collecting may function as a way of marking out an individual identity in the context of family and friends, as well as acting as a practical form of remembering. Richards also suggests that by acting as a display of earning power, this kind of activity
is affirmative of a masculine work ethic and so affirms a particular kind of masculine identity. Richards describes the way in which one boy (David) talks about his collection, describing it in terms of an avoidance of ‘emotional’ records, and choosing instead on the basis of ‘sound’ and ‘quality’ (Richards, 1998, p. 155). The emphasis here is on rational discrimination, choice and control—qualities affirmative of ‘macho’ masculinity. Interestingly, it is not only the music one likes that turns out to be significant in the construction of identity, but the music one has stopped listening to, and that one must eradicate from the record collection: most people try and deny or laugh at past tastes, although they might hold on to music with personal resonance (Richards, 1998, p. 105; DeNora, 2000, pp. 72–73).

Thus, the kind of music collected, the way collections are used and the act of collecting itself appear to have a gendered basis as part of the way in which a range of musical beliefs, acts and preferences mark gender difference. However, just as in other forms of cultural representation, music not only provides a way of marking and enacting gender, it also presents models of gender. How music ‘represents’ gender, and how these representations are engaged with, are considered in the next section.

Representations of gender in music

Theories of gender identity suggest that learning of gender-appropriate behaviour is due partly to gender role models offered in the media. A count of the number of representations of men and women in musical activities reveals many inequalities: for example, a study of representations of men and women in popular music television, radio and magazines in the UK during the 1980s and 1990s revealed that more men than women were represented overall, and that when women were featured it was as vocalists rather than as instrumentalists (Bayton, 1998). A second approach to the study of representations is through content analysis, which is used to reveal the messages in those representations. Analysis of music videos shows gender role stereotyping of occupational roles and behaviours in which male characters are more adventurous, assertive and aggressive than females, and in which females are more affectionate, dependent and nurturing (Seidman, 1992; Sommersflanagan et al., 1993). Analysis of 19th century opera has highlighted the way in which these operas require the female heroines’ death in order to achieve narrative and tonal resolution (Clément, 1988). However, representations do not simply produce meanings through which we make sense of the world; the social constructionist perspective adopted here argues that representations create the possibilities of what we are, constructing places from which individuals position themselves. This section considers both the signifying practices and symbolic forms through which gendered meanings are produced in music, and the subject positions it offers.

An important strand of ‘new musicological’ research has been the way in which musical ‘works’ contribute to constructions of gender. Gender ideologies in music have been investigated through critical readings of (often idealized) performances and works (e.g. McClary, 1991; Walser, 1993; Pfeil, 1995). Most critical enquiry has focused on vocal music (i.e. music with words) due to the grounding this provides for interpretation. In the case of instrumental music, commentaries have often based their gendered
readings on the gendered language used by contemporary critics, or on contemporary beliefs about genres and gender appropriateness. Although there is not scope in this chapter to do more than consider the issue briefly, it is worth considering how music comes to be heard in terms of gendered meanings. There are a number of possible sources of gendered meanings in music: for example, the influence of role models engaging in particular kinds of musical activity, the discourse surrounding music and music’s accompanying texts, lyrics and images. It has been argued that the texts and other visual images accompanying musical practices (e.g. programme notes, music criticism, musicological discourse) bind together musical structures and gendered meanings, and through these means (through the sedimentation of such meanings in musical material) the music acquires apparently ‘inherent’ gendered meanings (Green, 1997).

Evidence that listeners hear musical materials in terms of gendered meanings derives from a variety of sources. For example, Tagg (1989) found high levels of agreement between participants regarding the gendered meanings associated with television theme tunes: tunes associated with female characters had a slower average tempo than those for male characters, were legato and tended to change in dynamic level, whereas tunes associated with male characters tended to have more rhythmically and intervally active bass lines, and greater rhythmic irregularity. Listeners’ descriptions also indicated sex stereotyping of instruments (tunes associated with female characters featured the piano, strings, flute and mandolin whereas those associated with male characters were played by electric guitar, trumpet and xylophone) and of genres (female characters were associated with tunes that were classical–romantic or classically modal in tonal language, whereas the male tunes used rock or fusion harmonies).

The associations of particular kinds of musical materials in Western art and popular music with masculinity and femininity can be traced through music history. McClary has argued that, beginning with the rise of opera in the 17th century, composers developed a ‘semiotics’ of gender—conventions for constructing masculinity and femininity in music (McClary, 1991). Because these codes change over time, studying music can reveal gender organization available at a particular time. McClary’s comparison of the delineation of Orfeo and Euridice in Monteverdi’s opera L’Orfeo illustrates how the contrast between Orfeo’s rhetorical power and Euridice’s simplicity and innocence is constructed through tonal–harmonic means (McClary, 1991, pp. 38–48). In Orfeo’s aria ‘Rosa del ciel’, he commands the sun be still and listen to him and his rhetorical power derives from the ability of his song to arouse the expectations and channel the desires of listeners. So, for example, in the opening section, Orfeo’s embellished recitation over sustained bass notes not only defies musical conventions of the day, but arouses and controls listener’s expectations for tonal and melodic progression (Figure 7.1). Euridice’s reply, in contrast, is far less goal-directed than Orfeo’s and therefore affirmative of her gender role as a young and innocent female character.

Orfeo presents a paradox for Western conceptions of masculinity: on the one hand he must sing to demonstrate his rhetorical skill and mastery, yet this elaborate display is precisely what threatens to undermine his masculinity. These same contradictions are apparent in contemporary music-making. For example, Walser has argued that Heavy Metal stages fantasies of masculine power and control, signified by technical mastery of the electric guitar, use of vocal extremes, power chords, distortion and sheer volume
Walser points out that the enactment of virtuosity as a signifier of transcendent freedom and controlling power draws upon classical models: see, for example, the references to classical virtuosic style in Van Halen’s ‘Eruption’ (Figure 7.2). Walser argues that the overwhelmingly male teenage audience for Heavy Metal generally lacks social, physical and economic power but is besieged with messages that promote power as an obligatory component of masculinity. The fantasies of masculinity provided by Heavy Metal (and other forms of popular culture) therefore serve as a means by which such power can be enacted and as a way in which fans can confirm and alter their gender identities through involvement with it (Walser, 1993, p. 109).

(Walser, 1993).

Figure 7.1 Monteverdi’s ‘Rosa del ciel’ L’Orfeo. Extract showing delaying of tonal expectations. (Cited in McClary, 1991, p. 40.) Reproduced with permission from Cambridge University Press.

Figure 7.2 Van Halen’s (1978) ‘Eruption’. Extract showing reference to classical figuration. (Cited in Walser, 1993, p. 74.) Reproduced with permission from Wesleyan University Press.
The implication of some of these analyses is that music not only provides representations of masculinity and femininity, but that it can encourage listeners to adopt a particular subject position. This approach derives from film theory. For example, Mulvey has argued that Hollywood cinema constructs a masculinized gaze which controls events on screen along with the female image (Mulvey, 1989). Contrast this with Modleski’s reading of soap operas in which the subject position created in this case is a ‘decentreing’ which confirms women’s domestic position (Modleski, 1982): the implication of this reading is that the text is able to position the female spectator such that feminine-stereotyped characteristics such as passivity and self-sacrifice are affirmed (although subsequent research has criticized these kinds of approaches for producing generalized readings; e.g. Ang, 1985). Within musicology, critical analyses of particular works have investigated the way in which musical texts address a particular (gendered) audience and encourage the listener to take up a particular subject position (e.g. Bradby, 1990; Clarke, 1999; Dibben, 1999, 2000, 2001; Clarke and Dibben, 2000). One issue highlighted by these commentaries is that music which apparently affirms stereotyped gender roles can also afford resistant or subversive uses. For example, the Spice Girls can be viewed as empowering young girls by offering a more independent stance than is sometimes found in pop music (Dibben, 1999), and flamboyant male performers may offer a means for men to experience or imagine behaviours which are not normally available to them. Furthermore, camp performance and the emergence of gay and bisexual imagery (e.g. Bowie, Madonna) suggest that pop music is one area in which gender roles and relationships can be explored and assumptions challenged.

As well as positioning listeners in terms of a particular (gendered) subjectivity, music can have a disciplinary function on the experiencing subject in terms of the kind of physical involvement it affords. For example, DeNora reports one informant for whom musical structures provided a way to live out ideal social relationships: one female informant stated that being an alto in a choir allows her to participate in a group activity without being in the spotlight (DeNora, 2000, p. 69)—a kind of participation which is affirmative of a patriarchal construction of femininity as associated with the body (singing), and with a supportive rather than a leading and, therefore, a displaying role. Matthew Head’s analysis of 18th century German keyboard music for women reveals its disciplining function in terms of the kinds of physical states and displays it allows, as well as revealing a rather more ambivalent discourse of bourgeois femininity (Head, 1999).

There are a number of criticisms of the approaches to representation outlined above. First, although the models offered in such representations have been thought to be an important source of sex-role information, there has been a failure to theorize how this influence operates at a psychological level. Identifying the existence of images does not prove that they cause gender differences and inequalities, and there is debate about the extent to which messages are taken in. Secondly, much recent research is explicitly critical of the emphasis on the musical ‘work’ implicit in the gendered readings offered by musicologists such as McClary. Indeed, the implication of both DeNora and Richards’ research is that the musical ‘work’ is by and large irrelevant. DeNora argues that

Music takes it meaning from many things apart from its intertextual relationship with other musical works (and with the history of those works)…equally important to the matter of
music’s social ‘effects’ is the question of how musical materials relate to extra-musical matters such as occasions and circumstances of use, and personal associations . . . (DeNora, 2000, p. 61).

Much more research is needed into the way in which music is used by people in their everyday lives. This is not to dismiss the analyses provided by musicologists as irrelevant to gender, but to recognize that they are readings made from a particular subject position, with particular political purposes in mind. One role of the kind of critical readings which McClary and others engage in is to circulate meanings of music. Seen in this way, musicological writings are another instance of the way in which gendered meanings are produced, reproduced and (sometimes) laid bare.

**Conclusions: the ‘gendering’ of identity through music**

This discussion has presented unequivocal evidence for the marking of gender by musical preferences, beliefs and practices. I have argued that this is part of a wider and continuing effort to sustain the social definition of gender, and a sense of the gendered self. As already mentioned, music constitutes one of the most popular leisure pursuits of young people, it is integrated into people’s lives in a way which is particularly unique (music is heard in a wide variety of locations, while on the move and while engaged in other activities) and it affords the repetition necessary to the constant achievement of identity highlighted by so many theorists (e.g. Walser, 1993). Music, then, is particularly well situated to afford opportunities for the construction of (gender) identity.

One of the issues highlighted by the research presented here is the problematic character of attempting to draw conclusions regarding the way music is used in relation to gender identity alone, since it intersects with other aspects of identity such as generation, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and so on. In addition, there is strong indication that performances of gender are contingent on the context of construction, highlighting the need for research into identity to situate any findings within a particular socio-historical context. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify general processes by which music is involved in the construction of gender identity: identity is constructed through the musical activities people participate in, through their musical preferences and through their beliefs about what constitutes gender-appropriate musical behaviour. The effect of this gender typing, however, is that it constrains the opportunities and engagement with music which are possible for an individual at any particular time.

Analysis of music from the past reveals the differing ways in which gender is encoded in music, and the organization of gender relations in different historical periods. Musical representations of gender may act as models for gender-appropriate behaviour, as a means by which gender beliefs are circulated and as a way of enabling the listener to experience particular gendered subject positions. The ideological power of music to position listeners in this way is easily overlooked when music is viewed simply as ‘entertainment’. Music’s power to enact and perpetuate gender beliefs should not be underestimated, but neither should music’s capacity to afford the exploration of gender identities, which offers individuals the chance to imagine, and perhaps experience, gender positions in a way which might not otherwise be possible.
References


