



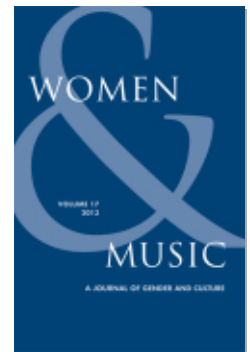
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Sounding Out! (review)

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Even within her thematic rubric, biographical portraits of key artists would have been welcome and could have easily expanded her appendix, “Dreamgirls: A Star-Gazer’s Guide to Musicians.” Perhaps the most useful aspect of *Songs in Black and Lavender* is the wealth of transcribed interview material with an important range of black musicians, participants, and organizers. Hayes wields a light touch in editing the often-lengthy interview passages. She has done the field a great service by having so many voices accessible and on record. These include the prominent voices of Linda Tillery and Judith Casselberry, next-generation musicians Nedra Johnson, Malika, and Naya’Hri Suhalia, and other musicians, festigoers, activists, and organizers.

Hayes hopes to reach an audience of general readers, specialists, and undergraduates, and she surely will. This study is rigorous but written in accessible and humorous language. Beyond the undergraduate classes for which its author aims, *Songs* will also be of great use to those teaching graduate courses in ethnomusicology, gender/queer studies, women’s studies, and black studies. I, for one, am happy to have this important reference on my shelf.

Sounding Out! By Madelyn Byrne, Renee T. Coulombe, Linda Dusman, Mara Helmuth, Kristin Norderval, and Anna Rubin. Redland, FL: Everglade Records, 2010. DVD.

PAULA MATTHUSEN

A percussive sound rolls around the listening space just prior to an emergence of numerous whispers that gently drift through the room. The subtle rhythms of language cascade from all sides of the space, intersecting at times with the original noises that begin the piece, before stopping abruptly for the narration of segments from Gertrude Stein’s *Ida Ida*. Initially, the carefully articulated language jumps abruptly between parts of the text and truncated elements of the original noise until relaxing at the cadence of the sentence, at which point sustained tones provide a moment of repose. This intriguing and exciting beginning to Linda Dusman’s *magnificat 4: Ida Ida* evolves throughout the piece, maintaining careful relationships between language, tone, and more percussive noise elements. This balance between varying degrees of tension, of creating an immersive and multivalent environment, very broadly speaking, characterizes many of the pieces on *Sounding Out!*, a new DVD featuring multichannel electroacoustic works by composers who have, each in her own unique way, undergone the process of coming out.

Discussing the wide variety of works provided by Madelyn Byrne, Mara Helmuth, Anna Rubin, Renée T. Coulombe, and Kristin Norderval partly depends on how one chooses to evaluate the premise of the album. It is nearly impossible not to recall some of the difficulties critics encountered when writing about an earlier CD released by CRI of music explicitly by lesbian composers, specifically lesbian American composers and aptly titled *Lesbian American*

Composers (1998).¹ In his review in the *New York Times* of the CRI album, Paul Griffiths wrestled with this notion, transitioning quickly among notions of sex, gender, nationality, and ethnicity: “The lesson may be that sex is much less important than national origin in influencing a composer’s music. French music, Russian music, American music: these all have their particular sounds. Women’s music does not. . . . Female composers . . . grow up in the same world as men.”² Griffiths struggled to articulate what would be sufficiently, immediately distinctive about music composed by a woman—much less a lesbian—to warrant the release of an album devoted to such music. Noting the stylistic diversity of the staggering group of artists on the album (e.g., Pauline Oliveros, Eve Beglarian, Jennifer Higdon, and Madelyn Byrne from *Sounding Out!* as well), Griffiths concluded that “sex, as well as sexual preference, is inaudible.” Yet the release of *Lesbian American Composers* had its own context, having been released just four years after *Queering the Pitch*.³ Now, nearly fifteen years later, what does it mean to foreground sexuality with relationship to the music presented?

In his recent and provocative article “Queer Sound,” Drew Daniel of Matmos confronts this issue, starting from a fairly different context, that is, the scenario of walking into a gay bar, hearing “French Kiss” by Lil’ Louis, and recognizing the particular place this song once had in the late eighties and early nineties. Noting his own surprising disconnect with the song, Daniel adeptly notes as well the need to continue rethinking and redefining sound and its relationships to identity, stating that “there are all sorts of places to go and people to be, but so long as one is not free not to be ‘someone,’ there is really nowhere else to go, and no one worth being.”⁴ But the dilemma Daniel confronts in finding the freedom to “go places” and “be people” is where *Sounding Out!* shows its strength. It reminds one that numerous musical voices exist—that, as Coulombe says in the liner notes, coming out itself is a continual process and that finding and creating a variety of spaces to listen differently is part of the creative battle at stake.

Madelyne Byrne’s *Arrival* works with the metaphor of travel and its resonance with self-discovery. The piece gently traverses a wide range of sounds, first the sound of rain, to glassy synthesized sounds, and at times incorporating sounds of planes taking off in the distance. Occasionally, one can hear elements of conversation, though they remain distant, providing the sense of something shifting and enticingly just outside the realm of intelligibility in the music. Additional video by Lily Glass creates an interesting and slow counterpoint to Byrne’s composition with its slowly shifting amorphous shapes of color that gradually waft across the screen.

1. *Lesbian American Composers*, Composers Recordings, CD 780, 1998 compact disc.

2. Paul Griffiths, “Women’s Music—Who Can Tell?,” *New York Times*, July 7, 1998.

3. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas, eds., *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994).

4. Drew Daniel, “Queer Sound,” *Wire*, November 2011, 43.

Anna Rubin's *Shards of Sappho* attempts to reach back in time, using synthesized plucking sounds (à la Karplus-Strong) to explore different tunings and scales as well as evoke different spaces and times. The delivery of the text and the instruments themselves at times bounce between the different speakers, creating a fracturing of time and space, forcing one to recognize the importance of context in very act of reading, listening to, and interpreting this poetry in the modern day.

Mara Helmuth provides a uniquely surprising multimedia piece in *Lifting the Mask*, featuring trumpet samples performed by Teri Knox. Drawing inspiration from the music of New Orleans, Helmuth creates an entirely new sound world, one in which the trumpet growls and occasionally erupts into melodic fragments, forming a counterpoint with itself, sustained tones, and elongated percussive samples.

12th Consciousness by Renée T. Coulombe features a series of gently conflicting pulsations, as disjunct sounds of the piano are reflected from speaker to speaker and whispers permeate the atmosphere, while ghostly tones glide effortlessly through the atmosphere, creating a haunting landscape. Occasionally, a giggle or a sentence fragment bubbles up to the surface. Meanwhile, graphics wander across the screen, along with occasional instructions to close one's eyes, inviting transgressive play with the desire to open one's eyes and see the visual dance at work.

Kristin Norderval's striking vocal utterances and migrating harmonies permeate the final track of the album in *my much desired one*, which evolves from samples of her singing, gradually layering one track on top of the other. The sweet, lulling environment this creates is gently ruffled by a whispering voice quoting passages by Monique Wittig. Camera work by Kaia Means and video editing and processing by Katherine Liberovskaya provide a delicate symbiosis to the piece, involving slowly moving concrete imagery that at times is abstract but seems frequently to draw from the physical world, using imagery of a silhouetted figure against the sharp geometries of buildings intercut by leafless branches in the foreground, for example.

Intriguingly, many of the pieces in some way use elements of the voice but often in surprising ways, seemingly as overheard conversation, an utterance that refers to no specific language, or through the idiosyncratic recitation of text. Though this is an interesting shared characteristic, the many ways in which the pieces are different are far more intriguing, as they resist simple categorization. The multichannel aspects of the works are also fascinating: each piece carves out a fully surrounding space in an effort to define it differently. Recognizing this difference of space acknowledges that each of these composers is, in many ways, enacting the need to "go someplace" and "be someone" to which Daniel refers. In her foreword to the CD, Pauline Oliveros most succinctly summarizes the need for such a collection, noting that the women featured on this

compilation “are seeking identity through their music together in a time that has an unknown journey ahead for all of us. May many others find support and inspiration through listening to this music.”⁵

It is the potential community that Oliveros implies in her comments that highlights the enduring necessity for such an album. The thematic and musical links between these divergent works together are forged through self-reflection on the process of defining oneself apart from perceived norms. As Coulombe says in the liner notes:

We initially decided that the theme of this project could be “coming out,” which at first meant that each of us needed to do some soul-searching and actively align ourselves with the outsider, to become the one who has to raise their hand and say “but wait, that doesn’t quite fit who I am. . . .” The idea of doing such a project is, in my estimation, particularly interesting at this historic moment: the very notion of “coming out” has become reified in our culture.⁶

How “reified” the process of “coming out” is remains debatable and context dependent nonetheless. An interesting example of this is showcased by how differently *Lesbian American Composers* and *Sounding Out!* are marketed. The former highlights the sex act itself with two nude women in an embrace on a sofa, while the latter features simple portraits of each of the six women featured on the DVD. The emphasis in this case is on the composers themselves, who have gone through and continue to go through the process of coming out. Their presence and persistent commitment to sound throughout provide an important document of unique voices in perpetually shifting times.

5. Pauline Oliveros, foreword to *Sounding Out!* by Madelyn Byrne, Renee T. Coulombe, Linda Dusman, Mara Helmuth, Kristin Norderval, and Anna Rubin, Everglade Records, 2010, compact disc.

6. Renée T. Coulombe, “Notes on Music,” in Byrne et al., *Sounding Out!*

Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical.

By Stacy Wolf. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 306 pp.

BRADLEY ROGERS

Stacy Wolf’s *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* deftly traces the changing roles of women in the Broadway musical from the 1950s to the present, focusing on how the genre has transformed its historical investment in heterosexual romance. By exploring the changing conventions in how women are represented in musical theater, Wolf makes a compelling argument for how the musical genre has responded to and participated in broader movements in feminism and cultural transformation. In an earnest tone reminiscent of John Clum’s excellent *Something for the Boys*, Wolf is especially success-