

‘Classical music – no less than pop – is bound up with issues of gender construction.’ (Susan McClary). Discuss.

In music history, women are notably absent. Even though performing music at home, during the classical period especially, was a social standard for accomplished women, traditional women’s roles as mothers, wives and housekeepers stopped them from finding a place in music history¹. Men were left to write as both male and female voices.

Therefore, when looking at gender construction, the *portrayal* of gender within music must be examined, and the most explicit form of classical music to do this is opera. In pop music, singers express themselves not only through their lyrics but through celebrity culture, making gender construction obvious to the viewer. With classical music this can be more difficult, as lyrics are not a feature of the entirety of the genre, unlike pop. Opera, however, forms a gendered voice explicitly delivered from a gendered singer, making it easy to analyse how the gender is constructed and presented.

Firstly, when looking at classical opera, it is important to remember that famous female portrayals come from the mind of a man, and therefore every female character seen has been “explicitly artificially constructed”². These ‘constructed women’ take very extreme forms in operas, with one being the ‘woman in power’. They are usually portrayed unflatteringly, with the defeat of this power often being the triumphant resolution of the opera.

Take, for example, the Queen of the Night from Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte*. She is portrayed throughout as a powerful character, but this power is manipulative and evil, causing the male protagonist Tamino to undergo hardship and trials in order to win the woman he loves. She is portrayed as violently changeable, unlike her husband and authoritative male counterpart, Sarastro. Indeed, her most famous aria is *Der Hölle Rache*, in which the opening text is: “Hell’s vengeance boils in my heart”. It is her power that must be defeated and is demonised throughout the opera.

Carmen (*Carmen*, Bizet) is a woman whose power is her dominant sexuality. She only has to throw a rose to Don José and he is besotted. She uses her sexual power to manipulate Don José, also using it to help her escape from prison- where he gets imprisoned in return- and convincing him to live with her, taunting him later when he cannot leave the smugglers’ caves and abandoning him in favour of the flashy Escamillo. Like Salome, Carmen is powerful, manipulative, and therefore unlikeable and her sexual power is what gets her killed.

Female roles such as Carmen and the Queen of the Night have personalities that encapsulate the belief that the combination of being female and having power is an unacceptable arrangement. This is enforced by trouser roles like Hansel, from Humperdinck’s *Hansel and Gretel*, and Cherubino, from Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro*, where women take the parts of foolish and immature young boys, with men consistently taking the roles of ‘men’: leaders, heroes and epitomes of greatness.

Male characters with similar characteristics to unlikeable female characters are not held in the same contempt. *Don Giovanni* (Mozart) opens with Don Giovanni attempting to rape Donna Anna and murdering her father, Commendatore. Nevertheless, even though Giovanni eventually descends to Hell- for the murder of Commendatore, rather than the mistreatment of women- he is still presented as dashing and attractive. Leporello explains to the audience that Giovanni has

¹ Cook, *Music: A Very Short Introduction*, p105

² Abbate, *Musicology and Difference*, p232

'conquered' many women across Europe - 1,003 in Spain alone. Although Leporello is gullible and foolish, the comparison of Giovanni's sexuality to Carmen's shows Giovanni in a much better light. Carmen is openly seen by other characters in the opera as manipulative, whereas Don Giovanni is heralded as a 'conqueror' by at least one character.

In *Turandot* (Puccini), Turandot's closed-off sexuality is seen as a challenge to Calaf, and Pinkerton, the American husband of Cio-Cio San in *Madama Butterfly* (Puccini), promises Cio-Cio San that he will look after her when she renounces her family's religion but is more than eager to desert her for three years and return with his new wife for the sole purpose of taking his son away from her. The audience is invited to understand and forgive him.

These male characters see women as their winnings or a means to an end, disregarding their lives and feelings, but are never brought to justice within the opera. They are allowed to get away with mistreatment of women by the men who write them into existence.

The other extreme in representing women is painting characters as feeble and weak, with stories that often present them as gullible and naïve.

Mimi, (*La Bohème*, Puccini) for instance, is introduced into the opera timidly knocking on Rodolfo's door, and her innocence and purity throughout the opera is what makes the opera's ending and her death so tragic. Her death cannot be justified in any way because she never did wrong: it is Rodolfo who distances himself with his jealousy.

Cio-Cio San kills herself because of the heartbreak that Pinkerton causes. The audience are allowed to feel sorry for her, as her aria *Un Bel Di* presents her as innocent and naïve - even childlike - yet the characters around her blame her for being so foolish.

The conclusion we can draw from the world of opera, therefore, is that women can either be:

- A. Weak and feeble, or
- B. Manipulative and unhinged.

Female characters are only allowed to combine virtue with strength when giving themselves up for God or the male protagonist. Blanche (*Dialogues des Carmélites*, Poulenc) is timid and fearful of the consequences of supporting the Royalist regime in the revolution but must overcome this anxiety to follow her true calling: God, whom she dies for in martyrdom. Aida (*Aida*, Verdi) hides herself in Radames' sealed vault with him, so that they can be together in death. Princess Turandot gives up her power and melts to Calaf's charm after he passionately kisses her. Liu, also from *Turandot*, saves Calaf and Timur by refusing to give Turandot Calaf's name even when tortured. When Turandot asks her how she has so much strength, Liu replies it is her love for Calaf, before killing herself: saving him by sacrificing herself.

These operas were all written by men across almost 270 years: these portrayals of women were not one-offs in the world of music. Male composers were teaching women through their operas what the mould of the perfect woman should be: one who sacrifices her self-worth and social power for a man.

It may be thought that pop music and classical music could not be further from each other, with classical music offering swelling orchestral pieces displaying death and agony in dramatic ways, and pop music, which is just three or four minutes of dance-like bopping at a time. However, this could not be further from the truth when it comes to gender constructs. Women in opera and female popular music artists get portrayed in a similar way: they are weak, with childlike qualities, or

powerful women with hyper-sexualised qualities. In the case of pop, a third option is that they are portrayed as both.

Many female pop artists sell themselves as both childlike and sexualised, which panders to both the child and adult audience. Katy Perry is a strong example of this. Her most memorable song and music video, which has over 454 million views on YouTube³, is *California Gurls*, where she is shown naked on a cloud of cotton-candy and shooting whipped cream out of rockets attached to her bra. Similarly, Ariana Grande's signature clothing choice is her cat ears headband, which she wears on tour whilst singing songs such as *Side To Side*, with lyrics like "ride dick bicycle".

Has this hyper-sexualisation combined with imagery of childlike innocence been created to balance the powerful sexuality of Carmen with the purity of Cio-Cio San? Where Carmen and Salome's sexuality was perceived as unlikeable, Perry believes her music is "soft-serve sexiness"⁴. Perhaps the best explanation is that artists who portray this juxtaposition are trying to conform to what the male-dominated industry has created as a perfect female mould, just as in the world of opera and classical music.

Rihanna, on the other hand, portrays female sexuality without the childlike innocence, and has 30 UK Top 10 entries in the Official Charts⁵. She presents herself in the music videos and tours of her songs in a way that matches their content and aims at a more adult audience. Beyoncé is portrayed in a similar way: adult themes in her music translate to a sexualised portrayal of herself, even if the song is not directly to do with sex. Unlike powerful Carmen, their dominating sexuality is not criticised and is often argued as sexual liberation: women taking control over their body and sexuality.

Seemingly, the industry standard is that a woman should be both independent (powerful) and dependent on her male counterparts (weak) at the same time. In comparison, male singers, despite often singing about wanting a woman in their lives, are seen as independent without the need for making a statement to say otherwise.

Musetta (*La Bohème*) is independent and headstrong as she teases Marcello and, later in Act Two, starts an argument with him- unlike the gentle Mimi. Musetta's part in the opera is, however, minimal, and is used by Puccini as a plot device- someone for Marcello to flirt with and someone to return Mimi to Rodolfo.

Independent women in music are still deemed unlikable, it is just seen in pop in a different form. Being an 'independent woman' in pop- i.e. not flaunting one's sexuality all the time- is either deemed prudish and dismissed or seen as daring, whereas female independence in classical opera is simply being argumentative but not powerful.

The modern opera *Anna Nicole* (Mark-Anthony Turnage, 2011) presents a different direction for the portrayal of women, depicting the rise of a Playboy model to celebrity status and the exploitative behaviour of those around her. Despite her obsession for fame and high sexualization, we are invited to be sympathetic towards her for her vulnerability when dealing with addiction and the death of her son⁶.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F57P9C4SAW4>

⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2015/01/13/katy-perry-thinks-her-female-empowerment-songs-are-perfect-for-the-super-bowl-halftime-show/?utm_term=.09c03b83a2d4

⁵ https://www.officialcharts.com/chart-news/rihanna-s-official-top-40-biggest-selling-singles__10975/

⁶ <https://www.roh.org.uk/productions/anna-nicole-by-richard-jones>

Despite a change in culture and the way women are represented, the typical attributes, as well as the idea of a 'perfect woman' remain. If women do not observe these then they are making a statement. In pop, as in classical music, being feminine is either all or nothing.

So where does this lead to in the future? As the younger generation grow up, more globally in touch and more able to experiment culturally than ever before, the age of fluidity of gender roles in music will likely blossom further. Surely, all musicians, both female and male, can find a common ground of gender identity in androgyny, which reflects the western world's younger generation exploring the spectrum of gender. However, so far, performing androgyny has been socially acceptable only in the male sex.

In the latter half of the 20th Century, artists emerged and thrived in the world of pop, not only because of their music but because of their androgyny. David Bowie's song 'Space Oddity' gave him a short span of fame, but it was the rise of his androgynous alter ego Ziggy Stardust that properly launched his career as a global pop sensation⁷. Similarly, Prince is heralded for his iconic femininity and androgyny, and even in his music he sings about the bending of gender principles: "I'm not a woman, I'm not a man / I am something that you'll never understand". On the other hand, women experimenting with androgyny at this time were less acceptable: Siouxsie Sioux was labelled "snapped, harsh, asexual" by NME in 1978 and given the nickname of 'Android'⁸, whilst Annie Lennox's drag outfit at the 1984 Grammy Awards caused the sound monitor to turn up canned applause due to lack of positive audience reaction⁹.

Take, too, the world of K-Pop, growing in popularity every month as the internet shares it globally. Groups such as *BTS* and *GOT7* are all male groups, whose experimentation with androgyny is what makes them appealing to their fans. They flaunt their femininity in their appearance while at the same time accentuating their masculinity in their attitudes. Female K-Pop sensations, on the other hand, play to their feminine attributes only. An all-girl K-Pop group, for example *Girl's Generation* or *GFriend*, must be bubbly, childlike and sexy, with many dressing up as schoolgirls just to achieve this hyper-feminine look. This is not their fault, of course: the K-Pop industry controls everything about the lives of their stars. Only one female figure, Amber Liu from the group *f(x)*, is explicitly allowed to experiment with androgyny by her record label, with more of a distinctly masculine appearance than any other woman in K-Pop¹⁰. Perhaps she is allowed to do so for the sole reason that she is the rapper, as perceived strength in the pop music industry is only for typically male roles.

Of course, androgyny in pop may have evolved in more recent years to be about marketing. The younger generation, who are the most widely connected generation in history due to the development of technology and the internet, are very aware of the existence of the LGBTQ+ community. More young people than ever are being able to see acknowledgement, representation and acceptance of this community in everyday media- a community that questions typical gender roles, boundaries and appearances. Pop music, as most things are in the 21st Century, is a business. Appealing to this generation of rule-breakers and game-changers in the form of androgyny is making money.

However, although catalysed by the younger generation, we could view the popularity of androgyny as the natural development in society and music. The pendulum will swing from one side to the other, and perhaps we are in the midst of the next swing: from classical music with rigid gender roles

⁷ David Bowie: *Finding Fame*, BBC iPlayer

⁸ <https://www.clashmusic.com/features/prove-it-on-me-androgyny-in-music>

⁹ O'Brien, *Annie Lennox*, pp94-95

¹⁰ <http://seoulbeats.com/2013/09/roundtable-whats-androgynous-idols>

to new music with high fluidity, just as the harmonic and textural attributes of renaissance era music shifted to the baroque period.

Music itself is a gender-less construct - it is only vibrations in the air after all- but the gender it is performed in affects the way people listen to and view it. If classical music's representation of gender was informed by the time it was written in, a time where male and female roles were very different, then perhaps pop music will increasingly become more experimental and androgynous. Perhaps the gender of the artist will become increasingly unimportant. Gender and experience help to shape the music produced, but really, we can only hope, female music and male music will one day be simply music.

(2494 words)

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