

# Women and Electronic Music

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**Salome Vogelín listens in on the CRI rerelease of 1977's 'Women and Electronic Music', one of the only examples lighting out the territory, featuring among others Pauline Oliveros and Laurie Anderson.**

'Women in Electronic Music' is the name of a re-released anthology originally pressed in 1977 by the label 1750 Arch LP in Berkeley, America. This collection presents work by the American women composers: Johanna M. Beyer, Annea Lockwood, Pauline Oliveros, Laurie Spiegel, Megan Roberts,

Ruth Anderson and Laurie Anderson. The producer of this contemporary CD and the '77 record version, Charles Amirkhania, introduces the pieces, underlining the pioneering character that this material assumed in the '70s, in comparison to a contemporary US music scene in which he sees a "prominent contingent of women composers". Why then I ask myself, has he made a point of making reference to the composers' gender in the title of the current release when originally no such distinction was deemed necessary or worthy, depending on how you look at it?

Although personally I was only just about to learn to read and write in seventy-seven, I believe that this re-naming of the same material 20 years after its initial release says a lot, not only about the music scene and its development over the last two decades, but more importantly about the enormous shift in gender consciousness, and consequently in the language that defines issues of difference, that we have undergone during this period.

One question that presents itself is whether or not it is helpful to make an issue of the artist's gender (or race), and why we have started to make such separating distinctions. The issue is very complex and I can find arguments for both views. However, as long as the work of the white male canon is the one in whose light we investigate the quality and content of women's music we clearly have a problem.

If we keep on appreciating women's compositions with the same musical history in mind that we employ for the understanding of pieces by male composers I feel we deny an important history that deserves its own hearing. A distinction between compositions by both genders does not mean promoting women's composition separately because their work is too weak to be appreciated in competition. Very much to the contrary; it is the acknowledgement that the socially constructed difference between the genders exposes woman to a different acoustic environment and a different perception of this environment due to her status in the society she lives in. It is very obvious then, that the composition of music that reflects on the way a woman hears the environment, and her 'noise-making' within it, must necessarily be different. This and more factually established

economic and political factors have rendered women's musical development a very different one. To affiliate it simply with male compositions means to deny its expression outside the canonic realm. On the other hand, to label it 'women's music' implies it is an 'Other' outside the canon and can therefore never attain this authority. So it looks like a no-win situation! However, if we understand difference as a human reality that everybody experiences when being compared to somebody else, and we start to take a work of art as the expression of a human being rather than that of a man or a woman, we will manage to emancipate not only women's work from a limited realm of appreciation, but every artistic expression as well. This does not mean to deny the tradition of art, but to allow for a diverse past. I believe we do not need to simplify art criticism as it inevitably suppresses a complex understanding and consequently the possibility for a diverse development of expression.

The pieces recorded on the CD represent a very varied range of expression, in terms of technique and instrumentation worked with, as well as in the issues addressed by the artists. The collection ought to be listened to not only in respect of its creators being all female but also as individuals. An initial gender relationship is directly valuable only to the extent in which the composer addresses the issue of being a woman in the atmosphere of the 1960s/70s America that she lived in (with the exception of Johanna M. Beyer whose piece was composed, but never played, in the late '30s). It should not exclude a hearing of her individual perspective of the acoustic environment. For me, a very important point of contact is that of time and space, allowing an acoustic identification to unfold through various narratives.

Every time and place is described by its musical infrastructure and music technology inventions that directly reflect on parallel developments in the commercial world – which in turn are audible in the soundscape. Electronic music expresses but is also limited in its materiality by the respective technological advances of its era. Technological parameters define, to an extent, the language of electronically created and manipulated aural expression. In this respect electronic music works as a signifier in a world where technology increasingly determines processes of leisure and work. Activity becomes substantially determined by the potential of a certain technology. The use of technology within the musical framework reflects on this limitation, as the creative impulse has to find expression through the language set by its instrumentation. This limitation of the

artistic expression is defined – to a degree – within the reality and experience of its designer: the dominant social class. In the commercial world such an interpretation would identify the development of technology as generating and sustaining the control of its creator over the physical and material world. This power structure might be at the core of the alienation and exclusion experienced through technology by many people. The use of technology in art then becomes a very ambiguous issue. Electronic music that is self-referential to its instrumental technology avoids, in my ears, that conflict by celebrating its existence instead of encouraging an awareness to the sonic materiality of a composition which might reveal a more critical stance.

The white male composer might find compositional solutions within the technological framework offered, as it in some ways reflects on his understanding of the world, any other group of musicians however will always inevitably have to find different expressions within the system, challenging its authority.

It's in this context that I find it impossible to talk about the compositions on the CD within a traditional understanding of electronic music. To categorise the pieces on the CD as serial, elektronische or musique concrète, would affiliate them to techniques that I actually find to be criticised within the content of the work. Such an identification means to deny the history of the composers with respect to the development of electronic technology and possibly the assertion of their exclusion. Even though I can recognise formal strands of serialism and elektronische musik in some of the compositions, I believe that this structural technique should not distract from the materiality within the compositions as it exposes a very different awareness to sound. All pieces on the CD deal with the environment through the personal experience and reality of acoustic events in a way that seems to hint at a much more critical view towards a technocratic world and the use of technology in the musical practice.

To communicate a feel of the works I could only describe them as creating, each in its own way, unentered spaces. All seven composers seem to be very aware of sound as a phenomenon in time and space and (very much unlike musique concrète) seek not to deny its experience, but play with the possibility this relationship achieves. Dislocation of rhythm and sound composes new spaces from the known materialities. The movement of sound within these defined spaces re-orientates the listener's perspective onto the sonic narrative. This re-identification of a musically constructed acoustic environment establishes an interactive level of communication, inviting the audience to participate in its association. At the point where composition and listening meet, a temporal and spatial plane is established that conveys to me an acoustic reference to its temporal and social circumstance. Each composer deals differently with this point of reference, offering a different angle of interpretation. Polyphonic perception enables a three-dimensional experience allowing memory and imagination to receive diverse associations.

It is in this diversity that I can experience sonically a time that I believe significantly shapes my being as a woman in the West now, in the late '90s, when I am about the age several of the musicians featured on the CD were when composing their respective pieces. By mapping a geography of the complex gender relationships apparent in Western culture, the work communicates the social dynamic of events instrumental to the development of femininity. The musical narratives illustrate an environment aware of gender differences and social change. When this vocabulary meets the musical canon, a new perspective challenges homogenising value systems. Radical forebearers of an other kind celebrate individual and collective participation through heterogeneous voices.

The lack of acknowledgement historically towards female musicians historically continues today, and this together with the feminist and female realities that are communicated in her musical language, formulate an alternative social history. Listening to this history, independent from any canonical interpretation and value system, could enable us to identify a different musical vocabulary, disclosing in its structure and materiality manifold narratives. This would not only re-discover a different musical fabric but would also, through its instrumentation, encourage a more diverse application of technology and in consequence initiate a different technological consciousness.

**Salome Vogelín** is a sound artist and writer.

