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A Study of Feminist Music Criticism in McLarney's "Negative Termination"

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Abstract: Traditional Western musicology has long been influenced by positivist trends, emphasizing the "basis" of academic research and the "authenticity" of history. Traditional positivism strives to exclude as many subjective factors as possible, pursuing the authenticity of documents and the reliability of evidence. The new musicology that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s seemed less "fond" of positivist ideas. New musicology is more interested in the subjective or personalized interpretation of musical works, integrating a wealth of cultural or social theories into these interpretations. For example, Lawrence Kramer, a representative figure in the cultural criticism branch of new musicology, incorporates Freudian psychoanalytic theory and other socio-cultural theories into his cultural-level musical interpretation of Richard Strauss's opera "Salome". This article will focus on three aspects of the new musicology field influenced by postmodernist trends, specifically feminist music criticism methods. The first part provides a brief overview of the content of the work, the second part discusses the specific manifestations of feminist music criticism used by McLaughlin in her book, and the third part examines and reflects on the feminist criticism employed by McLaughlin. This paper aims to understand and analyze the feminist music criticism theory represented by Susan McClary, so as to reveal the deep connotation of this music research theory, and try to analyze and discuss the shortcomings and the lessons that can be learned from this feminist music theory research, and hope to bring inspiration to young scholars in the field of Chinese musicology.

Keywords: feminist music criticism; gender and music; musical rhetoric; social and cultural context

1. Introduction

Susan McClary's 1991 book *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (hereinafter referred to as "Negative Termination") is a seminal work in feminist music criticism.

The book consists of an introduction and six articles. Most of the articles in this book were published in academic journals or at academic conferences between 1987 and 1989, and these articles were later compiled and published. The book approaches its content from a feminist and gender perspective. It can be interpreted on two levels: from the genre of music, it not only covers classic works in traditional Western classical music, such as operas like "Orfeo", "Carmen" and "Lulu"; but also focuses on popular music in the last two chapters. From the perspective of subject and object, the introduction and the first three articles place women within the role of music listeners, interpreting female characters in classic works by male composers from the 17th to early 20th centuries, such as "Eurydice" in Claudio Monteverdi's opera "Orfeo", "Carmen" in Georges Bizet's opera "Carmen" and "Salome" in Richard Strauss's opera "Salome". Furthermore, it explains why

the male protagonists in these classic works of male composers have completely different reasons for their musical rhetoric, musical characteristics, and images through a combination of sociological, cultural, and musical analysis. The text points out that these female figures in the classic works of male composers are all constructed under the influence of a patriarchal society, such as the "exoticism" (eroticism) and the image of "madness" embodied in the protagonist Salome in *Salome*. The last three articles place women at the perspective of creators and performers, analyzing the creative and performance techniques of contemporary musicians active in the 20th century, including serious composer Naija Van der Fei (Janika Vandervelde), performing artist Lori Anderson (Laurie Anderson), and pop singer Madonna. They explore how these artists deconstruct or rebel against the male-dominated music field through their music and bodies, thereby asserting their own subjectivity.

With her book *Negative Termination*, Susan McClary became famous in the field of feminist studies, opening up a new path for feminist music criticism and providing a foundation for future research on related issues.

2. The Combination of Two Texts — Musical Text and Social Text

McClary uses feminism as her theoretical weapon and, with her sharp writing style, adds new analytical perspectives to traditional music analysis. The core content of the musical criticism she employs is that music, as a symbol or rhetorical method, carries gender metaphors and socio-cultural connotations. In the introduction to "The Feminine End", McClary points out: "Since the rise of seventeenth-century opera, composers have painstakingly developed a set of gendered musical semiotics (semiotics): a convention for constructing music's masculine/feminine qualities (masculinity) and feminine/feminine qualities" [1]. This binary opposition directly presents to readers the most prominent ideas about gender differences in the West, "femininity equals weakness, abnormality, subjectivity; masculinity equals strength, normalcy, objectivity" [1]. She also argues that this gender-conscious musical semiotics is constructed by social history, noting that "the codes used to depict gender differences in music align with the social climate of the creators time, but given that individuals also learn their social gender through cultural discourses such as music, these codes themselves contribute to the formation of society" [1]. In other words, these codes reflect the social climate of the creator's time and have a reciprocal effect. They also contribute to the formation of a cohesive society [2].

Music not only functions as a symbolic mirror of society but also acts as a rhetorical tool that articulates and reinforces socially constructed gender differences. McClary argues that during Monteverdi's time, European society placed great emphasis on cultivating male rhetorical skills. The "wordless" (speaking void) Eurydice lacked both rhetorical ability and musical expressiveness, whereas the half-human, half-divine Orpheus possessed superior rhetorical skills, capable of moving all things with his song. In the opera "Orfeo", the composer assigned the roles of seduction and provocation to Orpheus, whose music is highly expressive. This rhetorical ability is also reflected in the music; according to McClary, Eurydice's musical line is marked by irregular rhythms and unresolved cadences, which convey hesitation and lack of rhetorical power. The text describes Eurydice's progression as follows:

Compared to Orpheus's extremely teleological (teleological) speech, Eurydice found it difficult to move directly toward her goal without justification... However, she eventually agreed to Orpheus's vow on D. Then she immediately backed down, as if afraid of being too bold [1].

Orpheus, on the other hand, proceeds with a kind of confident and steady musical line, simply using the bass to continuously express his steadfast resolve. The text points out: "In the opening paragraph, Orpheus commands the sun to stop and listen to him speak, using only a central note to construct an extraordinarily long invocation." [1].

Based on the above gender-conceived musical symbols and rhetorical methods, McClary believes that in traditional musical narratives, whether it is an opera with detailed textual instructions or a purely instrumental work (with the sonata being the most typical example), there is always the same "desire — anxiety — resolution" process [3].

In the opera "Carmen", the process of "desire — anxiety — catharsis" is followed. The heroine Carmen is beautiful and passionate, her charming demeanor captivating all the men around her. However, as a young woman living in a patriarchal society, she is also told not to flaunt her charm too much, for fear that it might instill fear and anxiety in the men around her. Thus, Carmen is ultimately killed by Don Jose, who adores her. This anxiety is resolved, and the atmosphere returns to its original peace and tranquility, bringing the story to a satisfying conclusion.

McClary points out in the text: "In sonatas, the main key/theme clearly occupies the narrative position of the positive protagonist; while the less powerful second key/theme, though necessary for the existence of the sonata or tonal plot (without this support or challenge, there would be no story), serves as the negative other in the narrative function. Moreover, a complete resolution — generally ensures that, whether semantically or structurally, the negative elements will be suppressed by the end, whether they are the secondary theme or just non-primary key areas." [1].

From this, it can be seen that McClary also believes that the sonata follows a process of "desire — anxiety — resolution". She argues that in long-term social history, the main theme of the sonata form has been assumed to have positive qualities, while the secondary theme has been assumed to have negative qualities. Ultimately, the resolution is achieved by returning to the key of the positive main theme through the negative secondary theme, marking the complete resolution of the sonata.

In summary, through the partial analysis of McClary's "Negative Causation", it is evident that feminist music criticism in the book places social and cultural factors within the context of music analysis. The socio-cultural text primarily refers to issues of sexuality and gender under a patriarchal society. Therefore, this method of music criticism essentially involves analyzing musical texts to reveal the hidden issues of sexuality and gender embedded in socio-cultural contexts through the overt tool of music [4].

3. Inspiration and Thinking

After the book was published, not only did specialized musicology journals feature reviews as usual, but even general cultural review magazines discussed its publication. In some American music departments, candidates for new faculty positions were even asked about their views on this book. According to an article compiled online, from 1991 to 1994, there were as many as 20 reviews in the English-speaking world [1].

It can be seen that since the publication of "Negative Termination", the western music academic circles have carried out a heated discussion on it, resulting in a vibrant intellectual debate marked by a diversity of viewpoints and methodologies.

Most of the people who oppose and reserve their opinions on McLaughlin's feminist music criticism method point out that her music criticism method is suspected of "preconceived ideas" and lacks objective and value-neutral judgment, and that McLaughlin's feminist criticism is more like a kind of "persecution paranoia" originating from women themselves.

Of course, the advantages of McLaughlin's feminist music criticism are also obvious, namely the use of interdisciplinary writing methods and the use of the term "multi-faceted" in the book to describe such a capacity and technique:

"She (McClary) does not focus solely on the analysis of musical structure like most musicologists, nor does she concentrate merely on the external environment of music as most music sociologists do. She combines both approaches, making her especially skilled at crossing disciplinary boundaries. Moreover, she has brought the findings of cultural

studies and feminist research into the field of musicology, opening up a new path for traditional musicological studies." [1].

Another obvious advantage is the focus on marginalized music (female, Eastern, black) that is excluded by established rules, highlighting the value of caring for vulnerable groups. McLaughlin writes in her book:

".....The theoretical scholars who first raised these issues came from positions that had previously been stripped of power by the mainstream: women, gay people, people of color, and those who grew up in colonial or post-colonial environments. These individuals, while shaped by Western culture, were often positioned as 'the other' within it." [1].

In summary, MacLachlan's feminist music criticism has its strengths and weaknesses. Her work represents a shift toward a broader "music and society" approach, and her attention to marginalized groups in her texts have provided valuable insights for Chinese academia. Therefore, how to utilize this method of music analysis is worth further research, as it can help stimulate enthusiasm and vitality in academic studies and discussions. The author believes that by combining music with social texts, this method opens up new perspectives beyond the traditional focus on musical scores. It also resonates with Mr. Yu Runyang's call for an integrated approach to music analysis (combining social and musical texts). However, it is important to avoid falling into the trap of "circular reasoning". Some scholars have raised the question: if one does not know that Tchaikovsky was a homosexual, would the research findings still hold?

4. Conclusion

This article delves into the feminist music criticism in Susan McClary's work "Negative Endings", revealing the deeper implications of this method of musical analysis. McClary's feminist music criticism not only paves new ground for feminist music studies but also offers fresh perspectives and methods to musicology. The author believes that what is most praiseworthy about McClary's approach is her integration of sociology, cultural studies, and musical ontology, which provides a critical interpretation of gender issues in both traditional and popular music. However, the shortcomings of this critical method are also evident, such as its neutrality, objectivity, and the risk of falling into a "circular argument" trap, as well as the lack of universality in the examples provided. These flaws are common in almost all emerging disciplines that combine music with disciplines outside of music, such as the "New Musicology" movement, led by Lawrence Kramer (Lawrence Kramer), who, under the influence of postmodernism, incorporates Freudian psychoanalytic theory into his operatic interpretation. This method of integrating music with disciplines outside of music has broadened the path for music analysis, but it also risks falling into the same pitfalls as McClary's feminist music criticism. Trapped in the same "circular reasoning" trap, that is, if one does not know the plot of the opera "Salome" or the composer Tchaikovsky's sexual orientation beforehand, could these conclusions still be drawn? Therefore, I believe that when using this method of music criticism that combines music with social or philosophical fields, it is important to avoid falling into the "circular reasoning" trap and to not invert the primary and secondary relationships between music and society. That is, one should not solely pursue social texts outside of music while neglecting the essence of music itself.

Despite this, McRae's method of music analysis has caused significant ripples in both Western and Chinese musicology circles. In the Chinese musicology community, discussions on Susan McRae have been particularly notable, such as the three-hour book club session hosted by renowned Chinese scholars Hong Ding and Liu Yanling in 2022, which had a considerable impact and provided valuable inspiration to the Chinese musicology community. The author believes that McRae's feminist approach to music criticism offers new avenues for thought in Chinese musicology research, promoting its diversified development. It also provides some guidance for scholars writing on music in China. Moreover, as young musicologists, they should have a stronger sense of social responsibility

when writing related papers or conducting research, which should be the original aspiration they uphold.

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