

**Gendering Musical Modernism: The Music of Ruth Crawford, Marion Bauer, and Miriam Gideon. By Ellie M. Hisama**

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**Abstract:**

This article is a review of the book "Gendering Musical Modernism: The Music of Ruth Crawford, Marion Bauer, and Miriam Gideon" by Ellie M. Hisama.

**Keywords:** Book Review | Music | Feminism | Women composers | Modernism

**Article:**

***Gendering Musical Modernism: The Music of Ruth Crawford, Marion Bauer, and Miriam Gideon.* By Ellie M. Hisama. Cambridge Studies in Music Theory and Analysis, Ian Bent, general editor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Figures, tables, musical examples plus seven movements or works reprinted in their entirety. Bibliography and index.**

For at least the last two decades feminists have urged publishers and authors of music history textbooks to include music by women composers. A quick perusal of recently published textbooks intended for the music history sequence reveals that they all include only a small number of works by the same handful of women composers and that analytic discussion of these works is lacking in detail. Moreover, music analysis continues to be underrepresented in feminist treatments of works by women composers, a crucial issue given that academia confers value on canonical compositions through music analysis based on meaningful methods.<sup>1</sup> Such conferral of value through analysis is particularly important for marginalized groups like women whose nonconformance to conventional procedures is more likely to be construed as incompetence than

as compositional innovation: in the absence of significant music analysis women's compositions will not be accorded the prestige they deserve. However, conventional analytic methods, which were developed to explain and evaluate canonical works, do not necessarily support feminist interpretations of music and music history. Hisama's *Gendering Musical Modernism* not only brings innovative tools to the project of analyzing the music of Ruth Crawford, Marion Bauer, and Miriam Gideon but also confronts the problem of reading the formalist analyses through feminist theory: for this and other reasons, it is a tour de force of feminist music scholarship.

Each of the seven analyses offered here uses a different method, as suggested by the music and the contexts of the composers' lived experiences as gendered subjects, "entwining" music analysis and social critique (181). Hisama makes no global claims about essential difference but rather documents the circumstances and attitudes of Crawford, Bauer, and Gideon through their diaries, letters, and published writings and demonstrates how the musical structures of these particular works comprise analogies to the composers' unspoken protest, experiences of marginalization, sexuality, identity, and political commitments. Her readings do not rely on that always suspect category, the "composer's intention," but rather situate Hisama's own hearing of the music from her subject position as an Asian American woman with experiences similar to those of her subjects. These are powerful premises for musical interpretation, for, as feminist theory's notion of "situated knowledge" shows, there are always epistemological limitations to "truth claims," which this methodology avoids, and these limitations proliferate when interpreting artworks.

Because analogy and metaphor are important means for perceiving and interpreting musical works, it is significant that Hisama's analytical methods focus on audible musical features, such as contour, register, texture, and timbre. Although some of her analyses employ pitch class set theory, probably the preeminent method of analyzing posttonal music, her original analytical tools stem largely from recent theories of contour, whose perceptibility offers clear advantages. Hisama's analyses are verifiable by listening and therefore are meaningful and satisfying. Significantly, Hisama rejects the conventional wisdom that modernism is inimical to the aesthetics and interests of women. This is a matter dear to my heart because much feminist music inquiry—following, it seems, the lead of feminist literary scholarship—seems to have leapt from nineteenth-century Romanticism to late-twentieth-century postmodernism, relegating modernism to the domain of men, machismo, and misogyny. This lacuna disadvantages women with modernist sensibilities, leaving their works underrepresented, their participation in modernist projects undertheorized, and a significant segment of musical expression politically unavailable to them.<sup>2</sup> Hisama's compelling analyses demonstrate that women composers have indeed used modernist idioms to create original works that also speak to feminist concerns.

The analytical methods employed in the seven analyses, although selected—and sometimes invented—to examine the particular material at hand, are in no way exclusive to these works; that is, they are models that may be applied to other musical works, although perhaps (or probably) arriving at different conclusions. These tools, then, are significant contributions not

only to feminist scholarship but also to music theory more generally. The arguments are amply illustrated with helpful tables and figures, and each of the short works or movements appears reprinted in its entirety, helpful for those of us who like to see more context for musical analysis and a tremendous boon to teachers, who can assign a self-contained chapter of the book (on which more below).

The diversity of Hisama's readings is perhaps my favorite aspect of the book: women, this variety implicitly argues, are not a monolithic entity whose needs can be answered by a response to Freud's simplistic query, "What do women want?" Because we are as individuated as men, different women experience, feel, and want different things, and an individual woman can experience, feel, and want different things at different times. Hisama's discussions of the third and fourth movements of Ruth Crawford's String Quartet (1931) illustrate this point. Each of these movements concerns the relationship of two "voices," analyzed in different ways and with different significance for expressing Crawford's experience as a woman. Calling on the concept of "double-voiced discourse" from feminist literary theory (19), Hisama develops Milton Babbitt's notion of "twist," that is, voice crossings within the (mostly) four-part texture, to argue for a feminist counternarrative of cyclic twisting and untwisting that undercuts the overt and conventional narrative of dynamic and registral propulsion toward a climax. While the drive toward a climax meets normative expectations of musical structure and may therefore be regarded as a dominant voice or discourse, the cyclic, nonclimactic twisting activity acts as a muted voice, a "space of resistance" (34) parallel to Crawford's own quiet resistance to the hubris of the men in her orbit: "Damn you," Crawford says to the men who exclude her from their meeting but beyond their earshot, confiding her sentiment only to her diary (18).<sup>3</sup>

The two voices of the fourth movement can, once again, be understood as those of Crawford and the dominant society, but here the "feminine" voice is far from muted, appearing in the first violin ("Voice I") and opposing the three lower voices—who play in octaves ("Voice II" [46])—in several ways. While the contrast of freely melodic solo versus structured (in this case serial) ensemble clearly calls on the concerto idea, the opposition is also echoed in other aspects of the movement's structure, including the prime contours of the melodic phrases. Initially, the two voices trade phrases rather benignly, Voice I and Voice II both using the same contour. But soon Voice I becomes quite contrary, rebutting Voice II with phrases of the opposite contour. The dynamics and forceful articulations mark Voice I as confident and commanding, not an analogy for Crawford's own voice but perhaps for the voice she aspired to: "I am trying to develop a (polite) frankness and make myself lose my fear of expressing an opinion," she wrote to Seeger (39). Where the twisting and untwisting of the third movement form a muted counternarrative, the subtle operations of contour serve to reinforce the overt oppositions of the fourth movement. The analyses of these movements and their readings through their composer's lived experience suggest that women's voices are rich, varied, and imbued with meaning; formalist analysis can help to bring that meaning into the foreground.

In Hisama's analysis of Crawford's "Chinaman, Laundryman," one of her *Two Ricercari* (1932; the other is "Sacco, Vanzetti"), vocal register forms an analog to the social feminization of Chinese men in the United States, while the transformation of contour is emblematic of the political transformation of the Chinese worker in H. T. Tsiang's poem. Hisama reads two movements of Marion Bauer's *Four Piano Pieces*, op. 21, through musical representations of power relationships: in "Toccata" (No. 3) the shifting power dynamic between the pianist's hands evokes Suzanne Cusick's notion of a "lesbian relationship with music" and the lesbian undertones in Bauer's relationship with Ruth Crawford; and in "Chromaticon" (No. 1) pitch and contour form structures that are challenged and nearly overturned only to be reinstated, a useful analogy to Bauer's progressive but somewhat inconsistent social beliefs.

Demonstrating that Miriam Gideon's private papers reveal conflict about her status as a woman composer that she did not betray publicly, Hisama finds Gideon's feminist voice in "Night Is My Sister," No. 2 of *Sonnets from Fatal Interview* (1952), settings for voice and string trio of Edna St. Vincent Millay's sonnets, and in "Esther," No. 2 of *Three Biblical Masks* for violin and piano (1960), each of which portrays a character from the Purim story. Hisama shows that Gideon uses "circuitous voice leading," doubling, and motivic saturation and variation to render Millay's texts, which portrays a woman's developing awareness from passive waiting to the realization of her abandonment, and to portray the "feminist agency" of Esther, the compliant and deferential wife who transforms herself into the decisive and independent rescuer of the Jews.

In addition to its invaluable music analyses, *Gendering Musical Modernism* contributes fascinating, original biographical and historical research, particularly on Gideon and Bauer, about whom little has been published. A significant presence in these biographies is Milton Babbitt, who has been (unfairly, I think) held up as a representative of the purportedly antifeminist aesthetic of modernism but whose statements in Hisama's interviews express profound sympathy for the situation of these women modernists, who were, after all, his teacher (Bauer) and colleague (Gideon).

The book is a good read with a wealth of detail about early-twentieth-century American culture, and it is especially useful for teaching: each chapter can stand alone as a lesson for an upper-division course or as a reading for a graduate seminar. I have used the two chapters on the Crawford string quartet with good results in twentieth-century music history courses and in a seminar on music, gender, and sexuality; any of the chapters would also be useful in music theory and analysis courses. Certainly, every university library should own this book, and individuals will also find it to be a worthwhile investment: *Gendering Musical Modernism* is destined to become a classic of feminist music scholarship as well as an indispensable text for teaching feminist theory, twentieth-century music, and music analysis.

*Elizabeth L. Keathley* is an assistant professor of music history at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. She received her doctorate in music from Stony Brook University, where she also earned an advanced certificate in women's studies. Her research concerns the connections among music, modernism, modernity, and various forms of "difference," including gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. Recent publications include "Taste, Disgust, and Feminist Aesthetics," *Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education* 5, no. 1 (January 2006): online at <http://mas.siue.edu/ACT/index.html>; and "Postwar Modernity and the Wife's Subjectivity: Bernstein's Trouble in Tahiti," *American Music* 23, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 220–56.

## Footnotes

1. Ellie Hisama credits the "imaginative efforts" of theorists Lori Burns, Marion Guck, Marianne Kielian-Gilbert, David Lewin, Judy Lockhead, Fred Maus, and Joseph Strauss and of musicologists Susan McClary and Suzanne Cusick for "invigorating" theory with feminist approaches (181).
2. For a more detailed discussion of these issues see Elizabeth L. Keathley, "Revisioning Musical Modernism: Arnold Schoenberg, Marie Pappenheim, and *Erwartung's* New Woman," Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York, Stony Brook, 1999, especially chapter 1, "Historical and Critical Contexts for *Erwartung*: Modernism and Feminism."
3. Hisama quotes from an entry in Ruth Crawford's diary, held in the Seeger Collection of the Library of Congress, dated February 22, 1930. The men at the exclusive meeting, which founded the New York Musicological Society (later the American Musicological Society), were Crawford's teacher and later husband, Charles Seeger, Joseph Yasser, and unnamed others. Henry Allen Moe, director of the Guggenheim Foundation, initially did not wish to consider Crawford's application, just as Seeger initially resisted teaching her merely because of her sex. But other men did intercede on her behalf, including Henry Cowell with Seeger and Dane Rudhyar with Moe (18 nn. 7, 8).