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Music, Beauty, and Privileged Pleasures: Situating Fine Art and “Aesthetic” Experience Five Essay Reviews of *Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction* by Carolyn Korsmeyer

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Music, Beauty, and Privileged Pleasures: Situating Fine Art and “Aesthetic” Experience.

Five Essay Reviews of *Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction*

by Carolyn Korsmeyer

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Wayne Bowman, Editor

Historically, the notion that musical experience should be considered a subset of what is called “aesthetic experience” has figured prominently in arguments designed to convince skeptics that studying music is of general educational importance. This “aesthetic rationale”¹—the effort to rationalize on “aesthetic” grounds how music is essential to human growth and development—served not only to persuade skeptical others of the significance of our efforts, but also to shore up our senses of worth, collectively and individually. It became, as result, tightly linked to our senses of disciplinary and personal identity. Only, the nature of “the aesthetic” on which this rationale was based and from which, subsequently, significant parts of our identities were crafted, was seldom subjected to thorough or critical scrutiny. Indeed, it could be argued, its utility was due in no small part to an elusiveness and vagueness that permitted its use wherever an affirmative adjective was needed: aesthetic this, aesthetic that, aesthetic whatever.² The term gained considerable currency as a loose synonym for expression, for feeling, for creativity, for beauty, for profundity, and often, it seemed, for “genuine” or “authentic” musicality itself.

In such circumstances, to criticize the aesthetic rationale for music education was to undermine the very possibility of musical value, to say nothing of the honor and

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integrity of music educators for whom “aesthetic sensitivity” had become the *sine qua non* of educational credibility. Thus, a way of understanding certain aspects of certain musics and of explaining some of the reasons some of it might be important became *the* key to the nature and value of all music, everywhere, and for many people, *the* entire point of music education. This is not to deny that there were those who had carefully considered understandings of what a specifically musical variant of “aesthetic experience” might entail, understandings that were judiciously circumscribed and qualified. But these fragile and contingent understandings were eventually transformed into ideologies,³ buttressed frequently by the kind of fervor that characterizes doubt as betrayal.

In the waning years of the twentieth century, the debates over the aesthetic rationale for music education became more heated. To those not philosophically inclined, these arguments may have seemed much ado about nothing—differences of personal opinion that were a source of embarrassment, undermining music education’s professional solidarity, credibility, and integrity.⁴ However, with the passage of time, some of the profession’s defensiveness toward critiques of the aesthetic rationale has begun to subside: it has become increasingly apparent that the notion of “aesthetic value” at the center of this rhetorical storm was not in fact the timeless absolute its advocates had claimed it was. And the consequences of relinquishing these claims to the universality and neutral objectivity of aesthetic doctrines have shown themselves to be not only less dire than many had expected, but beneficial in many respects.⁵

We have become increasingly aware that the aesthetic rationale for the benefits of music study, instead of being based on music’s innermost essences, was, like the notion of “the aesthetic” itself, a cultural construction. Like most cultural constructions, it emerged as a way of addressing particular sociocultural problems and concerns; and it owed its continued existence to its efficacy in addressing those needs and interests.⁶ Only, human needs and interests change over time. And among the important things we

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have come to realize about human needs and interests is that they tend not to be the universal sorts of things we once took comfort in believing they were: human needs and interests are nearly as various as humans themselves. Since theories are tools that are crafted in service of certain ends (which is to say, certain needs and interests), it is seldom the case that a given theory, however efficacious it may be for certain uses, is equally efficacious for all: theories are abstractions, and are selective in the evidence upon which they draw. They validate certain kinds of data while marginalizing others. As musical and educational voices representing different needs and interests have demanded to be heard, the adequacy of the aesthetic rationale has become increasingly suspect.

The needs and interests served by the idea of aesthetic value never were universal: rather, they were the needs and interests of certain social groups. And the claims to universality, objective neutrality, absolute status, and the like, served (a) to advance these needs and interests as though they were everyone's; (b) to silence competing needs and interests; and (c) to bifurcate the world of music into the genuine (the aesthetically valuable) and an illegitimate, inferior remainder. This was neither the best way to understand music, nor was it particularly becoming of a profession committed to musical education.

Now, the book with which this collection of review essays concerns itself does not advance explicitly the argument outlined above; nor do the various scholars who review the book. Nor, for that matter, is this book concerned with music education *per se*, or even, extensively, with music. But among the reasons for having selected it for critical review is that the book puts together—even in its title—things that conventional aesthetic doctrines have insisted we keep apart. *Gender and Aesthetics*, by Carolyn Korsmeyer, provides, among other things, an accessible accounting of the historicity of the concepts of art, fine art, artistry, aesthetic value, aesthetic experience, beauty, expression, and more—and of the various ways these have incorporated and perpetuated gendered stereotypes subversive of the needs, interests, and actions of (among others) women. I will not pursue in my remarks here the important relations and distinctions between

gender and feminist concerns: several reviewers do that quite effectively. Instead, I will use this forum to point out the ways that ideas like art, the aesthetic, and beauty, as gendered constructs, undermine the comforting, inspiring claims traditionally made on their behalves by the music education profession. The first three chapters of Korsmeyer's book support this effort very well.

The notion of the "artist," Korsmeyer reminds us, "is inseparable from ideas about what counts as 'art'" (15); and what counts as art has varied dramatically over the centuries of recorded history on the subject: "the products that count as art . . . have a history that shifts in tandem alongside the changing idea of the artist" (16). What emerged in the modern period, however—the period, not coincidentally, from which the idea of "the aesthetic" also emerged—was the notion of the artist as "a fully autonomous individual who creates for the sake of creation alone" (10). An important corollary to this concept of "the artist" (and, more loosely, "artistry") was a conceptual and practical division between "fine" and practical or applied arts—often parallel to the more general distinction between art and craft. The concept of fine art "singles out works [and by extension, artist/producers of such works⁷] that are produced for their *aesthetic* value alone" (26)—in distinction, that is, from works or actions that are functional, practical, utilitarian. Thus, the end of art is beauty and beauty alone: as Victor Cousin put it in 1818, "utility has nothing to do with beauty" (27).

"The notion of aesthetic value," Korsmeyer explains, "emerged from new approaches to pleasure and to the receptivity and appreciation that were summed up in the idea of 'taste'" (28). Good taste was grounded in aesthetic pleasures, pleasures contrasted to those associated with action, use, economic value, social meaning, and bodily gratification. To have good taste, then, was to take aesthetic pleasure in the full and proper apprehension of (polite) things designed solely for that end, in works of art created by artists for the sole purpose of aesthetic gratification. True art was, as the saying goes, "for art's sake": for appreciative rather than practical engagement.

This opposition between the beautiful and the practical was also evident in the idea of the artistic genius, a creative individual with a “powerfully original mind” capable of “vaulting over” conventions and rules to “discover entirely new ways of conceiving and acting. . .” (30). That this unique, imaginative creative capacity (genius) was attributed to the male mind is hardly coincidental, once one sees the ways these various notions interconnect. The idea of fine art precludes by definition many of the endeavors in which women, historically relegated to the domestic rather than public realm, were engaged. That the artist is stereotypically male follows almost automatically: the practical nature of women’s domestic obligations assures their status as artisans rather than artists. To plumb the depths of creative imagination, Korsmeyer explains, required considerable freedom—“freedom from tradition, from the fetters of social expectation and constraint, perhaps even from family and other responsibilities” (32). Such freedoms fell primarily to men, most often of privileged social class; seldom were they characteristic of women’s lives and experiences.

“The noteworthy thing about the implications for the presumed gender of the artist,” writes Korsmeyer, “is that everything that is included in the elevated category of fine art has a typical maker who is masculine, to the point that for some art forms women were actually considered unfit to participate fully, and were diverted to lesser, adjunct roles” (33). Gender is a “systematic and occasionally insidious phenomenon that can impart to concepts considerable power to shape the ways we think and see the world” (34). And despite radical changes to the status of women in society since the historic period that gave rise to these concepts, gendered expectations about what counts as art, about who qualifies as an artist, and about what kinds of products and experience are worthy of such recognition or status, continue to shape belief and value systems in ways that have undesirable consequences.

The term “aesthetic,” notes Korsmeyer, was first employed in eighteenth century philosophy to designate a “level of cognition that one receives from immediate sense experience prior to the intellectual abstraction which organizes general knowledge” (37).

It was soon revised, however, to refer more broadly to the kind of insight imparted by the experience of beauty—insight that was particular rather than general, and intuitive rather than logical. Establishing the validity of these particular, intuitive insights, these judgments that certain things constituted bona fide instances of beauty, was a major preoccupation of the time. It was therefore important to set standards for beauty and its attendant pleasures, to distinguish “genuine” instances and sources of aesthetic pleasure from imposters.⁸

Among the pleasures that might be mistaken for aesthetic ones, thereby detracting from authentic standards of beauty, were pleasures that were selfish, self-interested, self-serving, merely personal. So the idea of “aesthetic experience” came to figure prominently in the effort to distinguish the pleasure occasioned by genuine, durable beauty from that which was personal, sensual, and fleeting. Kant’s version of the aesthetic notoriously excluded both “interested” pleasures and conceptual orientations, in an effort to establish its “subjective universality.”⁹ Although aesthetic judgments were subjective, he sought to prove, they were not necessarily idiosyncratic: indeed, they were universally available to any and all who were capable of assuming (or inclined to assume) the correct (i.e., aesthetic, disinterested, conceptless) perceptual stance.

Assumptions like these helped distinguish the cultivated from the boorish, and were important parts of the machinery that helped distinguish the socially privileged from those less so, at a time when an emerging middle class made such distinctions matters of considerable concern to those being displaced.¹⁰ This much is well known. But as Korsmeyer also explains, “the ideal aesthetic judge, the arbiter of taste, was implicitly male, for men’s minds and sentiments were considered to be more broadly capable than women’s” (46). She points, for instance, to the “distinction between a ‘feminine’ taste for things that are pretty and charming and a ‘masculine’ taste for art that is more profound and difficult” (47), further made manifest in the important aesthetic distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. Among the terms of criticism at the time, Korsmeyer explains, was the idea of “effeminacy”—applied to the work of male artists, but not

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women, since “a work with similar quality by a woman would simply be feminine and thereby charming and minor” (47). In short, the quest to establish standards for aesthetic judgments was part of a broader quest to establish standards for pleasurable experience; and in that quest, “the preferences of people who were already culturally accredited” became the criteria for determining validity. Such people were, by and large, men of social privilege, which is to say that ideas about taste and beauty (“aesthetic judgments”) imposed standards instead of discovering them (48).

These conventional aesthetic doctrines restricting the appreciation of beauty to those who assume the disinterested aesthetic attitude had the effect of prohibiting questions, since to ask questions (say, about moral or political concerns implicated in a work of art or a piece of music) would violate the aesthetic attitude by dragging in extraneous considerations. “It is precisely the prohibition on asking questions that has prompted many feminist critics to reject this tradition in aesthetics,” observes Korsmeyer (50). Indeed, convictions like these have often been used to seize disciplinary control over music study, declaring entire ranges of musical and musicological discourse out of bounds. These strategies of isolation and prohibition function ideologically, suggests Korsmeyer (after Cornelia Klinger): they are “consonant with the social subordination and exploitation of women” (51). Rejecting these aesthetic orientations admittedly undermines the disinterestedness and universality conventionally claimed for them. However, Korsmeyer points out, such losses must be weighed against the restoration to music of a crucial attribute muted by aesthetic theories: its power.



Against the older (modernist, Enlightenment) aesthetic traditions,¹¹ Korsmeyer asserts, contemporary theories and practices emphasize the reinstatement of desire. Also influential are anti-universalist stances, grounded in convictions that a neutral, universal point of view is not just impossible, but politically implicated in concerns like gender, class, nationality, and historical perspective. “Universal ideals,” she writes, “have been replaced by the value of the particular perspective mindful of its situation in society and

history, without pretense to universality” (56). And as to the structure of traditional aesthetic theories:

Aesthetic objects are assigned the passive role of being-looked-at rather than active looking; they are objects presented for the tasteful scrutiny of the perceiver. . . . Combined with the gendered thinking that pervades eighteenth-century accounts of beauty, this structural relationship can take on what we might call the form of gender in the relationship between subject and object, a structure that possesses traits parallel to those obtaining between masculine and feminine positions more literally described (57).

The structure of aesthetic appreciation (in which the passive, beautiful object stands as a feminine counterpart to the activity and potency of the male artist) is, thus, poorly suited to certain kinds of art. Its “spectator-art disjunction” does not serve participatory or group experiences—music making, to take a nontrivial example. “Theories of [aesthetic] taste,” Korsmeyer reminds, “are theories of connoisseurship rather than of participation,” theories that perpetuate “assumptions about what kinds of arts are central models for aesthetic theory” (57).¹²

“The paradigm of musical composition in the fine-art system is a work that is just to be listened to for its own beauty, intricacy, novelty, or complexity—in short, for its aesthetic qualities alone,” Korsmeyer observes (62). As we have also seen, the notion of artistic genius was also involved. And these modernist aesthetic ideals, writes Korsmeyer, helped create “a climate in which women’s participation in the arts was fraught and difficult” (58). In music specifically, the inaccessibility of the fine-art system’s professional opportunities to women assured their status as amateurs: people who performed and created in private, often domestic environments, earning little or nothing in recompense. “No matter how accomplished, an amateur performance is for a relatively small audience of intimates; its purpose is diversion or entertainment, the musical version of decoration” (68-9).

The fine-art tradition is “but one moment in the history of art,” writes Korsmeyer; and “it is one that emphasizes the autonomy of art and the contemplative distance between audience and artwork” (99). These orientations favor experience that is abstract

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and disembodied; objects or works whose pleasures are not overly or overtly sensual; and undertakings whose functionality or practicality (usefulness) is not direct or conspicuous. Fine art's existence is solely concerned with experience that is said to be aesthetic; and aesthetic gratification¹³ comes of having perceived and experienced aesthetic qualities alone. However, Korsmeyer argues, under the fine-art orientation women's creative engagements were largely confined to areas that were practical, functional, and often sensual (food preparation, for instance); they were thus, *by definition*, neither artistic nor conducive to experience that was aesthetic. Yet, she observes, "the presence of aesthetic qualities alone does not make something a work of art" (99). There is a "deep gender bias" in the way we have come (under aesthetic/fine-art philosophical traditions) to understand bodily senses. Here we encounter the "operation of gender at a level of conceptualization where the very presumptions regulating philosophical importance are formulated" (102).¹⁴ It is for these reasons that many feminist interventions, both philosophical and artistic, are committed to exposing the fundamental "error and power" of the traditions we have been discussing here.


Korsmeyer's point is that much of the purported "difficulty" of feminist art in the postmodern era stems from its rejection of "the aesthetic values that reigned when the concept of fine art developed in modern history" (108). Conventional aesthetic notions like "expression" and "significant form" serve to honor certain kinds of artworks and their makers, and to delineate features that distinguish excellence from mediocrity. They also serve to "smother" attention to the sexual politics of representation. Korsmeyer examines the important distinction between art and non-art through Dickie's institutional theory, which asks "not what makes a work aesthetically valuable but what qualifies it to be called 'art' at all"; and Danto's historical/theoretical theory ("Art these days has very little to do with esthetic responses"—quoted by Korsmeyer on page 116). She summarizes, in a statement aesthetically-enamored music educators might do well to consider carefully: "What artworks share is not any perceptual quality (such as beauty or

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significant form or the expressed visions of artistic genius) but is rather a relational quality with art traditions unfolding within culture” (117).

Perhaps the most provocative and most easily misunderstood aspect of Korsmeyer’s book is her treatment of what she designates “difficult pleasures”—the *disgust* or *revulsion* she suggests constitutes a contemporary parallel to one of the aesthetic hallmarks of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, sublimity.¹⁵ Although I will not attempt a thorough examination of her arguments here, it is important to understand her basic argument. Because of the ways gendered binaries have been implicated in the neglect and denigration of the feminine and of women, feminist theorists and artists “have a particular stake in mind–body debates,” she explains (132). By evoking disgust—“above all others the most physical, visceral emotion”—some contemporary feminist artists challenge directly the traditional doctrines conflating art with beauty and the pleasure of disinterested contemplation. Unlike modern aesthetic discourses that were rooted in theories of pleasure,¹⁶ she explains, contemporary—and in particular, feminist—perspectives often resist affirmation and the evocation of comforting emotions, deliberately evoking emotions instead that are “difficult, painful, and aversive” (136). An important part of such artistic endeavors is the “shocking disruption of traditions of aesthetic value” (133).¹⁷

Whether music is capable of evoking the kind of disgust Korsmeyer describes is an interesting question that need not detain us here.¹⁸ But even if disgust and revulsion were beyond music’s capacities, the broader issue warrants consideration: that the polite tastes and detached (disembodied) appreciation associated with modern aesthetic theory—and to which, note once more, most versions of the “aesthetic rationale” for music education appeal directly and centrally—are relatively poor fits to many of the things many people find so compelling about musical experience: the impulses Nietzsche designated Dionysian—energy, disorder, unruliness, the visceral—the very satisfactions, one might say, of musical *action*.¹⁹



Regardless of one's philosophical stance on the particular issue of musical disgust, these concerns should remind us of the extreme fragility and porosity of the borders between/among sound, music, and noise.²⁰ It is not just that people who reject traditional norms are considered non-musicians, as each of our reviewers rightly points out: it is also that the intentionality, habit, and identity so closely bound up in musical experience are such that sound perceived to lie outside the range of *musical* sound (a range whose borders are both constructed and variable) is simply *not music*. Sound asserting musical status can be and often is a presence that is variously annoying, invasive, or revulsive. The use of Frank Sinatra recordings for psychological punishment; of Bruce Springsteen recordings as psychological weapons; of recorded classical music to keep “undesirables” from congregating in certain public places; and of music as an instrument of torture:²¹ each points to musical power well beyond the kinds envisioned by modern aesthetic theory.



The questions I have tried to raise here, taking Korsmeyer's book as a point of departure, are (a) whether and how the assertion that music's value is primarily “aesthetic” (as that is conventionally understood) can be sustained; and (b) whether music's value should be regarded as primarily, intrinsically, inherently, or exclusively “musical,” when that term is taken by definition to implicate the exclusions of modern aesthetic theory. My response to both questions is “no.” The differences between music as an occasion for aesthetic experience and music as human (social) praxis, and the differences, in turn, between aesthetic education and music education are not just noteworthy, but potentially profound.

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Our five reviewers bring five very different perspectives to Korsmeyer's book, and raise concerns far too numerous and provocative to address here in any detail. But here is a selective orientation.

Among Elizabeth Keathley's many intriguing points, I want to point to several that resonate broadly with the issues I have been exploring just above. Given the

“structural sexism” that extends “all the way back to fine art’s original premises,” Keathley reminds us, “inequality is built into structures of the things we teach, from playing concert music to its appreciation.” In light of this, she wonders, can the aesthetic be “refunctioned,” or “is it only and always a privileged pleasure?” Can there be “art for all,” or does that notion inevitably suggest “a diminution of art’s aesthetic value?”²² Can we disarm the elitism inherent in “the aesthetic” by acknowledging and teaching social context along with appreciation, or do the origins of ‘the aesthetic’ make it impervious to such interventions? Pointing to the “gulf” that separates popular and classical music—a gulf created by a fine-art concept that construes these as radically different musics—Keathley suggests that many musical actions/interventions by feminist artists—actions that might otherwise be expected to alter the ways we think about what music is (and in turn the ways instructional practices shape the ways students learn to think about music)—are undercut or circumvented by institutional/disciplinary conventions that assign them dismissively to extra- or sub-musical categories like (mere) performance art or (mere) popular music.²³

Charlene Morton approaches these disciplinary divides from a different angle, proposing that Korsmeyer’s book might be a very useful resource for specifically interdisciplinary course offerings in undergraduate music education—instructional settings where students might encounter issues and ways of thinking the typical music education curriculum avoids assiduously.²⁴ Such courses might help develop pedagogical innovations that would advance both co-curricular reform and positive social change. Innovations and reforms like these would, she suggests, help extend music education’s purview beyond “the practice room, the classroom, and the concert stage.” Morton envisions instructional situations in which music education students would learn “how music and musical practices often perpetuate forms of oppression like cultural imperialism, exploitation, and heterosexism.” She also mounts a vigorous critique of music education’s predilection for visually mediated curricular and instructional approaches, approaches in which music literacy and visual spectacles pre-empt attention


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to what is uniquely musical: sonority, timbre, and texture. Citing the adverse impact of the advent of literacy on “cultural sensoria” (John Shepherd) more generally, she argues strenuously for what one might call biocentric and ecocentric reorientations of music education, in which issues like ecological sustainability and the feminization of (mother) nature might contribute to a dramatically-expanded conception of the profession’s ethical range of influence.

Amidst the numerous questions Korsmeyer’s book raises for Constantijn Koopman, two seem to come to the fore: whether the *disgust* in which she is interested in the latter chapters of her book is musically possible from a strictly philosophical perspective;²⁵ and “what a consistent conception of feminist aesthetics might look like.” Regarding the latter concern, he suggests that Korsmeyer’s account leaves him with the impression feminist aesthetics is a predominantly “negative approach,” one that criticizes traditional concepts of art and aesthetic experience for neglecting, victimizing, and excluding women. Koopman would like to see, in addition to such criticisms, “robust alternatives” to traditional concepts and practices. Here, Koopman points to what some regard as the fundamental dilemma for feminist aesthetics: if it accepts conventional assumptions (uses “the Master’s tools,” to use Audre Lorde’s vivid phrase) it risks self-contradiction. If, on the other hand, it takes the truly radical stance of starting anew with different tools, it assures its own continued marginality: a gloomy set of alternatives, to be sure.

Drawing upon the work of Suzanne Cusick, Sally Macarthur describes the dilemma this way: Since “the artist is always gendered male unless called ‘the woman artist’” (Korsmeyer 34), accounts of women’s musical contributions must always tell two stories—one about their gender, the other about their music. Men’s contributions, in contrast, need tell only a musical story. But the label “women’s music,” Macarthur explains, “is a problematic one, for it immediately signals that it belongs elsewhere.” Macarthur finds “unsettling” the fact that considerations and concerns like these must be repeated yet again in Korsmeyer’s book: unsettling, because they have such a “familiar

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ring,” and signal that despite decades of insightful feminist scholarship so much work remains to be done. One dares hope that gender studies and feminist critiques have begun to make some inroads into music education; but the political and systemic obstacles are significant, and there is indeed a very long way to go.²⁶ Macarthur readily acknowledges that work like Korsmeyer’s which “demonstrates how music operates according to cultural norms that value the masculine perspective has much to teach us.” She adds, however, that another crucial part of the work to be done involves demonstrating that women’s musical practices are not simply inferior. Her own approach, she indicates, seeks to situate feminist or feminine aesthetics in the space “between male and female (or masculine and feminine) . . . not as something opposite to male but as something characterized by both genders.”

Claire Detels, on the other hand, asserts that feminist aesthetics *does not* typically concern itself with “the notion of a specifically female approach to aesthetics or aesthetic appreciation, the so-called ‘feminine aesthetic’.” The challenge for feminist aesthetics has been, rather, “to counter the gender-neutral claims of philosophy by exposing universalism as masculinism and by exploring ways in which gender identity and its associations influence our aesthetic frameworks, terms, and definitions,” both negatively and positively. Detels argues that the field of philosophy is a relative newcomer to these efforts, compared to the thirty years of impressive scholarly work in feminist aesthetics from fields like musicology and music history. While she acknowledges the value of a recent trend to the “philosophization” of feminist aesthetics, Detels is critical of what she sees as Korsmeyer’s neglect of the many important scholarly products in feminist aesthetics—and of Korsmeyer’s failure to go beyond what one might reasonably expect by way of gender analysis in *any basic introduction* to mainstream aesthetic theory. It is essential, she continues, that a treatment of feminist aesthetics go beyond “pure philosophy” into *history*, since “the details of history” can both reveal biases and intervene to change them. Furthermore, Detels worries that Korsmeyer’s thematic organization and philosophical orientation may actually reinforce, especially for

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novices—which is to say most students—the stereotypical gendered binaries they are intended to criticize. The primary question in which Korsmeyer appears interested, according to Detels, is *Why were there so few women in art and music?* Instead, she should have attempted to use the historical record to “debunk” that very notion. To avoid reifying the binary view of gender, Korsmeyer should have introduced more historical counterexamples, argues Detels.

Regardless of their impact upon the field of philosophical aesthetics, Detels asserts optimistically, “ideas from the field of feminist aesthetics have had long lasting influence on the scholars and subject matter of literary theory, art, and musicology.” Although many music theorists still cling tenaciously to “philosophy’s beloved universalist assumptions,” the long-standing belief in the irrelevance of culture to aesthetic judgments has begun to wane. “What we regard as important in the sensual realm—what we do or do not see, hear, taste, smell, and touch²⁷—is the key to our collective futures,” concludes Detels, “and feminist aesthetics can help us do better than we have in the past.”

In the spirit of dialogue to which these reviews are dedicated, Carolyn Korsmeyer responds first by offering an account of the current state of feminist perspectives and feminist aesthetics in her discipline, philosophy, and then by thoughtfully amplifying several of the discussion threads raised in these review essays. To the first of these points, and to those who are impatient with the basic level on which her exposition sometimes operates, she indicates that “feminist perspectives are poorly integrated into the field of philosophy”—the field for whose students her book is primarily intended. This necessitates, in her view, a review of the basic foundations of gendered critical analysis. The term “feminist,” she allows, may be an apt modifier for certain philosophical work in ethics (e.g., “ethics of care”; and some critiques of utilitarianism and Kantianism) and in epistemology (e.g., some variants of standpoint epistemology); but the situation is different when it comes to the sub-discipline of philosophical aesthetics, where there exists “no general aesthetic theory that can rightly be labeled ‘feminist aesthetics’.” What

one finds instead is “a set of critical alerts that stand guard against reassertion of traditional biases.” Thus, Korsmeyer expresses wariness of the term “feminist aesthetics,” and indicates that she tries hard to avoid its use.²⁸

Korsmeyer explains that she chose to structure her book around “the earliest of insights to emerge from feminist scholarship,” gendered binary oppositions, because these hierarchical dualities are among the templates that frame theoretical thinking. Since they are more often the tools of thinking than the objects of thought and critical scrutiny, their pervasiveness and tenaciousness too-often go undetected—facts that make their consideration an “indispensable starting point for feminist analysis.”

Because it is explored in interesting ways by various reviewers in this issue I have not yet referred to one of Korsmeyer’s particular interests: the tastes, figurative and literal, associated with food and its preparation. Her conclusions about food’s potential status as an “art form” warrant our careful consideration, I believe. She resists the appellation “art form” because it “does not do justice to the complexity of food practices and their significance.” More specifically, she argues that in order to qualify as an art form, food would have to be capable of the “disinterested” savoring requisite of specifically aesthetic attention. “I would not call cuisine a fine art,” says Korsmeyer, “because too much is sacrificed for the gain of a label.” Although their traditional values have often been deliberately defied, classificatory terms like these have abundant conceptual baggage that is not easily set aside. As I read these statements, I cannot help but substitute “music” for “cuisine”: the fit is a very good one, I believe. This disposes me to ask how the fine-art concept of music has shaped and continues to shape our assumptions of what music is, and to shape our assumptions about which (i.e., whose) music is the proper focus of formal instruction. What in our understandings of the nature and value of music has been sacrificed “for the gain of a label?”

I want to conclude this introductory editorial essay, and not for the first time, with some reflections on disciplinarity and the difficulties of interdisciplinary dialogue.²⁹ As Korsmeyer acknowledges in the opening lines of her essay, the conversations attempted

Bowman, W. (2005). Five essay reviews of *Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction* by Carolyn Korsmeyer. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. Vol.5, #1 (January 2006). http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Bowman5_1.pdf.

in these reviews involve “academics from different backgrounds and with different theoretical allegiances.” Precisely. And because of the nature of these backgrounds and allegiances, our conversations³⁰ are not always those of neighbors across the back fence. In fact, too often our “conversations” are not conversational at all. Disciplinarity is, as I have commented before, a kind of identity, deeply rooted in shared habits and convictions.³¹ As Korsmeyer aptly observes, calls for cooperation across disciplines “are as often facile as they are fruitful” (16). Perhaps, as she suggests, then, interdisciplinary conversation is bound by its nature to be “contentious and irresolvable.” However, contentious and irresolvable need not mean rancorous and pointless.

Korsmeyer continues, “We have much to learn from seeing the paths that others take to subjects of mutual interest...” This states quite nicely one of the fundamental convictions upon which the Mayday Group and these book-review issues of *ACT* are predicated. Disciplinary frameworks and outlooks are learned and habitual; and as such, they can be modified. We can learn the pragmatic habit of changing habits when circumstances warrant.³² And it seems to me that Charlene Morton’s idea of interdisciplinary courses for undergraduate music education students (and their instructors!) represents a crucial step in that direction. None of us underestimates the obstacles, I am certain: but identifying their origin is crucial to addressing them. With that point in mind, I will give the last word to Elizabeth Keathley:

It is striking to me that administrative lip service to interdisciplinarity is not usually backed up by support in the form of relief from disciplinary obligations—relief that would permit people to give interdisciplinary work the time it demands and deserves. I’m not sure whether that is due more to the infrastructures of institutions or to the power structures within disciplines, but I think it is important to point out that many failures to live up to calls for interdisciplinarity are structural rather than personal.³³

Notes

¹ Sometimes labeled MEAE: music education as aesthetic education.

² It is this capacity of the term “aesthetic” to mean so many contradictory things that disposes me to avoid use of the term. I believe I speak and write with greater clarity as a result. I invite readers to join me in asking, as I now do whenever I encounter the word: (a) precisely what it is intended to mean in the context at hand; whether (b) it adds something indispensable to the point being made; or whether, on the other hand, it (c) could be deleted—or changed, say, to “musical”—without consequence. My answer to (a) is most often, “Who knows?” while my responses to (b) and (c) are frequently negative and positive, respectively. Note: my criticisms do not mean that I deny experiencing in some musical circumstances things some might wish to call “aesthetic”—but rather that I think more apt and more useful descriptions are generally available.

³ By, one is tempted to say, disciples and true believers.

⁴ To some, regrettably, these debates seemed pointless—matters of no consequence to the business at hand: teaching and learning music, pure and simple. I say “regrettably” because of the extraordinary naiveté of such “practical” stances.

⁵ Renouncing such claims has been crucial, for instance, to the acknowledgement of musical diversity and cultural pluralism.

⁶ To ask whose needs and interests it served, and whose it did not, is therefore a revealing question when it comes to understanding the heat of the debates

⁷ Parenthetical insertion mine.

⁸ This, in turn, because of a need to distinguish people whose claims were warranted from those who were not.

⁹ To be more specific, and perhaps fairer to Kant, he did draw a distinction between ideal or pure beauty on the one hand, and adherent or dependent beauty (judgments related to what things of ‘this kind’ are supposed to do: a love song, for instance) on the other. The problem was, as Noel Carroll has argued, that Kant extolled the former and subsequent philosophers ignored the latter: thus effectively transforming a theory of ideal beauty into a theory of art.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Janet Wolff’s *The Social Production of Art* (New York: New York University Press, 1984); Preben Mortensen’s *Art in the Social Order: The Making of the Modern Conception of Art* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997); Larry Shiner’s *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); and Austin Harrington’s *Art and Social Theory* (Polity Press, 2004).

¹¹ Note that this “older,” modernist aesthetic tradition is invariably the tradition invoked by music education philosophy. Note, too, that “newer,” postmodern aesthetic traditions are designated “aesthetic” primarily in virtue of their inclusion in the academic

philosophical field historically designated “aesthetics.” The adjective “aesthetic” and the noun “aesthetics” have very different references.

¹² It might be fairly objected that there exist “aesthetic” theories that avoid such biases—Dewey’s experiential theory, for instance. However, whether Dewey succeeds in bridging this most fundamental of dualisms remains to be seen; and that his attempted re-definition of “aesthetic experience” failed to radically reorient the field—at least to date—is arguably beyond dispute. Part of the problem, it might be argued, stems from Dewey’s failure to assign musical experience a central place in his accounts.

¹³ A notion that is itself much debated, since if “aesthetic experience” serves to gratify, it is not “for itself” after all.

¹⁴ Thus Korsmeyer designates it “deep gender.”

¹⁵ In her response essay printed here, she qualifies this claim in important ways.

¹⁶ “Many philosophers identify beauty as a type of pleasure” (134).

¹⁷ This resonates in certain ways with Adorno’s conviction that music is obligated to resist and challenge, although he hardly came to these convictions through feminism! Nor, of course, would he have condoned a deliberate or direct attempt to evoke disgust.

¹⁸ In part, because each of our reviewers takes up some aspect or other of this claim.

¹⁹ Again, it is important to acknowledge that alternatives to modern accounts of aesthetic experience exist—although they were decidedly not invoked in music education’s “aesthetic rationale” (and, had they been, would have led to strikingly different claims and conclusions). Consider, for instance: “From the pragmatist point of view, aesthetic experience is not characterized only as disinterested contemplation of art works and other elements of our environments of our environment as objects of perception. Aesthetic experience is intertwined with different social and cultural practices in the flux of our everyday life.” Or, more directly, “Action, practice and movement are epistemologically significant elements of experience. The environment is not just perceived, it is experienced by acting, moving around and participating in different practices...” Pentti Määttänen, “Aesthetics of Movement and Everyday Aesthetics,” in *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Special Vol. 1 (2005).

<http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=347> (retrieved 26 December 2005).

²⁰ I have attempted to explore the fragility of these boundaries in my “Sound, Society, and Music ‘Proper,’” in *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, Volume 2 no. 1 (Spring 1994) 14-24; and in my “Sound, Sociality, and Music” (Parts I & II), in *The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning*, Volume V no. 3 (Fall, 1994) 50-67.

²¹ The Sinatra reference is to a teacher reported to use Sinatra recordings to make after school detention more distasteful and punitive for students. The Springsteen reference is

to the U.S. military's use of Springsteen recordings to help drive dictator Manuel Noriega from his secure compound. The use of classical music reputedly keeps youth from congregating and loitering in shopping malls. Music's broader use as an instrument of torture is frequently mentioned in the mainstream media.

²² Among the possible musical variants of this question: Under what educational circumstances might "music for every child" be possible? Does that very notion negate the commitment to musical excellence espoused by so many music educators?

²³ She also points out that attempts at intellectual interventions notwithstanding, "most of the world still lives by its gut, without reflection or self-examination, and its knee-jerk evaluations are rehearsed *ad nauseum* in popular culture, especially advertising, every day."

²⁴ This avoidance is in no small part a function of the "methodolatry" (see Thomas Regelski, "On 'Methodolatry' and Music Teaching as Critical and Reflective Praxis," in *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 10:2 (2002) 102 -123) that dominates music education curricula, often constituting its primary, if not sole, distinction from music performance curriculum at tertiary levels.

²⁵ The artistic practices upon Korsmeyer builds her argument are not musical ones.

²⁶ Even among those who are committed to critical theory and analysis there is surprisingly little awareness or recognition of the extent and the importance of the groundbreaking work that has been done by women (as well as men with feminist commitments) in these areas. The paucity of references to gender and feminist work in the professional music education literature remains, frankly, disappointing.

²⁷ Note this qualification, this way of characterizing the concerns of the realm of "the aesthetic": the realm of sensually mediated experience. Aesthetics is, according to Detels, "the study of sensual perceptions and judgments of taste in the whole wide world of human sensual experience, including experiences of the arts and of nature." Readers might find it interesting to compare this not only with Korsmeyer's understanding of aesthetic experience, but also the pragmatist understanding cited in note 19, above. This latter understanding dramatically alters the meaning of the term by expanding what "experience" is understood to entail.

²⁸ Perhaps this resonates on a certain level with the reservations I express about the term "aesthetic" in note 2, above.

²⁹ Comments on disciplinarity were included in my editorial introduction to *ACT* Vol. 3 no.1 (May 2004).

³⁰ Here I am speaking in general terms, not referring to the authors of these book reviews.

³¹ See *ACT* Vol. 3 no.1 (May 2004), devoted to the topic of music and identity.

³² On the habit of changing habits, see *ACT* Vol.4 no. 1 (March, 2005), devoted to exploration of pragmatism's habit concept.

³³ Personal correspondence, 8 December 2005.