

Review Essay:

Strategic Artistic Essentialism: Why It's Better to be an Artist than a Woman--

Woman as Artist: Papers in Honour of Marsha Hanen (ed. Sutherland and Rasporich)

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Christine Mason Sutherland and Beverly Matson Rasporich, eds. *Woman as Artist: Papers in Honour of Marsha Hanen*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1993. 238 pp., prefaced by one illustration of Marsha Hanen, acknowledgements and table of contents. Includes 16 illustrations, 1 musical example. Softcover. No price listed. ISBN 1-895176-37-9.

There have always been female artists of genius: composers, singers, instrumentalists, playwrights and painters. Unfortunately, centuries of male-dominated power structures have prevented these important artistic producers from receiving much notice. In the past few decades, the body of music by women composers has finally received due attention. One of the reasons it has become so appealing is because it contains so much undiscovered great music.

A challenge for scholars exploring this music is to avoid the tempting trap of focusing on the definition of gender differences. "Women's" art or "women's" music, if isolated as a special category, will be used to maintain the negative stereotypes that have kept women artists and composers subordinate and unnoticed for so long. Musicologists who must grapple with the "woman composer" question, face the problem of whether to assess the accomplishments of women composers despite the recurring and frustrating conditions that too often suppressed their artistic development, or to compare them as non-canonic artists on equal grounds with their male counterparts.

These limited choices present a double-bind: if a woman composer is viewed as only having written music because she managed to overcome the odds, then she may be positioned as something of a rare commodity, rather than an important composer of her time. This would put the focus on her plight as an underdog composer who managed to overcome strife for a moment of artistic glory, rather than focusing on her compositional achievements themselves. On the other hand, if the same woman composer is positioned and evaluated equally along-

side the great masters (according to the same criteria that made them "great"), or beside non-canonic male composers then this female composer will be found lacking in both cases. When positioned beside their male counterparts, historical women composers will be viewed and, out of centuries of habit, positioned as secondary, the "proof" being that none were ever admitted to the canon, most likely because of their inferiority. As long as scholars preface the artistic achievements of women with the label of their gender, women composers and artists will continue to be compared to men composers and artists in a male-dominated and -constructed paradigm. As these are difficult habits and mind-sets to break, many scholars have been attempting a variety of strategies to meet the challenge in order to bring this long ignored music and the many barbed issues that accompany it into greater focus.

Some of the problems that can emerge when framing a body of artistic works by women or about women as "feminine" are particularly noticeable in *Woman as Artist*, a collection of papers written in honour of Marsha Hanen, President of the University of Winnipeg. At first glance, the book's introductory remarks jump off the page as "essentialist" thinking about femininity. Christine Mason Sutherland claims that the book is "feminine" in several ways: it "honours a woman for her achievements on behalf of women; it is by women; and it demonstrates methods that are typical of women." She explains that these

"feminine methods" show recognition for a more "dialogic and collaborative rhetoric" over the "monologic and hierarchical," the latter being the traditional type of rhetoric which is tacitly assumed to be "masculine." But a *Festschrift* that honours a particular individual is neither a distinctively feminine model nor a new one. Writers, researchers and historians of the past (all, no doubt, male), invented the *Festschrift* which is evidence against collaboration being a singularly feminine model.

Another problem evident in this book is found in the claim that the development of the career of Marsha Hanen has been toward these "feminine" qualities. Although Hanen may value collaboration and connectedness, and might be a nurturing, sympathetic scholar, teacher and administrator herself, to those who do not know her, the fact of her having accepted the Presidency of the University of Winnipeg may be perceived as evidence to the contrary. One wonders if the "masculine" belief in competition, drive, aggression and the value of hierarchical models influenced Hanen as she climbed her way to the top of a patriarchal, elitist and domineering institution such as the university. Without explanation of Hanen's use of that privileged position and some record of her negotiation with and distribution of power, the gender distinctions made in this book are seriously undermined and questions of the book's claim of authority on feminine, feminist and female grounds must be raised.

Any essentialist claim to femininity pigeon-holes women's experience and reduces it to a generalized stereotype. Not only do such incomplete essentialist snapshots of women limit women's experience, but such claims to femininity also contribute to the devaluing of women and their position on the margins because what is essentially "feminine," is projected onto what is essentially "woman." Western culture has both constructed what is "feminine" and simultaneously devalued it. Such narrow definitions of femininity result in thinking that keeps "woman" a subjugated and devalued subject category.

A much more strategic or productive use of gender in celebrating the artistic contributions of women would be to position them and their artistic works as expressions of their "constructed" gendered identities instead of products of absolute femininity as a static and definable category. This strategy would acknowledge gender as a fluid construction that is always changing rather than as a clearly defined absolute, resistant to time and evolution.

"Femininity," when seen as the other "half" will only perpetuate the values of what is still an absolute, largely patriarchal system where women and/or the feminine are positioned as secondary or subordinate.

Fortunately, despite its narrow, gendered framing, and sometimes contradictory ideologies, *Woman as Artist* is useful as an example of the challenges and dilemmas that arise when presenting artistic accomplishments as gendered or as "women's work." On one hand, it is desirable and exciting to share some of the accomplishments of women artists, writers, composers and playwrights. On the other, positioning these accomplishments as the products of "women" or "female" artists already implicates those products as "feminine," and the status of the artist as it is constructed as essentially "female," and therefore all that accompanies that category. Some of the papers in the compilation echo the editor's introductory description of femininity: for example, Martindale's "The Unfeminist Figure of Melancholy," Scott's "Heroine," Epstein's "Women in Music: Is there a Difference?" and Flynn's "Prairie Pioneers: Canadian Women in Dance." Others move beyond with more post-modern notions of gender and social construction: for instance, Pamela McCallum's "Postmodernism, Knowledge and Gender." Despite these contradictions, there are several themes that when combined give the reader a sense of what struggles accompany the path of the "Woman Artist."

In "Edging off the Cliff," for example, Aritha van Herk points out that many women artists believe they are not and cannot be writers or artists. Van Herk uses the metaphor of stepping off of the edge of the precipice to illustrate the risk and lack of support that so many women who want to engage in artistic activities face. She believes the solution lies in each woman's ability to look inwardly, and in finding the strength and the courage and spark of creativity to take the necessary risks despite the odds that they might face. This is the theme many women share: having a great capacity to persevere in the face of daunting odds and seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Another theme has to do with adapting to one's difficult circumstances. In "Aphra Behn and Contemporary Canadian Women Playwrights," Susan Stone-Blackburn explores the slow progress women playwrights have made in the past three centuries. She says that many playwrights have been successfully silenced because the themes they present in their works do not always fit in with traditional expectations, making the play unfit for

production in the view of many directors and leaving them unperformed and excluded from the history of theatre.

Tamara Palmer Seiler discusses in her "Images of Winnipeg's North End: Fictionalizing Space for the Ethnic and Female 'Other,'" the ways that female writers describe this area of Winnipeg. In comparison with male writers, who describe this region as a "dualistic combat zone," female writers shape it into a place where "dualities are shattered and a new type of space emerges that is more inclusive of ethnicity and gender." Alice Mansell, in "Contemporary Art and Critical Theory in Canada," considers art by women that is both expressive of women's experience and also incorporates references to traditional European artwork of the Masters. Mansell describes the process in the creation of her own artistic works that have done this and uses it as an empowering experience. She claims that her creativity in her art, particularly when she refers to the Masters in her work, has allowed her to explore the "sites of discomfort that arise when the masculine is assumed." These pieces reflect the theme of women's need for reframing, restating and restructuring their attitudes, their perspectives and their lives so that they are more personally meaningful to them as women and truer to their own feminine/female/feminist experiences.

A final theme reflected in some of the papers in this collection have to do with the value of nurturing and lovingly guiding other women to success by intimately sharing important knowledge gained from their own personal experiences. In "Models, Muses and Mothers of the Mind," Diana M. A. Relke discusses the mother-child intimate bond found in the mentrix-student model which she claims changes our view of creativity into more of a collaboration than as previously thought in more traditional mentor-student models of working. And in "Mrs. E': A Personal Memoir," Marilyn Engle provides a very personal account of and tribute to Mrs. Egbert, an obviously kind and generous piano teacher in Calgary who nurtured her students to excellence.

These themes, the traits and qualities of these women surface repeatedly in this brief history of women artists. These admirable human qualities make the women artists discussed in the compilation seem remarkable and noteworthy. Perhaps these qualities reflect what many have considered to be the "essence" of President Marsha Hanen's life and life's work as well. Several personal anecdotes about Hanen precede some of the papers, and Margaret J. Osler's "Portrait of Marsha P. Hanen,"

outlines some of her most admirable qualities. This along with Eliane Leslau Silverman's invitation to women in the Afterword to pursue creativity make a strong pitch for the cause: that women should press on, pursue their goals, support and nurture each other as they continue to strive for excellence in their individual worlds, just as Marsha Hanen did and apparently still does.

The "Postscript" by editor Christine Mason Sutherland attempts to unify the collection by concluding with two themes she views as central to the book: the remarkable strength of women and the theme of celebration. The works and lives of women should be celebrated, she says, because so many women have managed to overcome the odds and pursue their art and their work even in the face of many obstacles. Despite these celebratory sentiments and reports of women's great accomplishments, overall the book left me with the slightly unsettling feeling that being a woman artist was actually still a liability, not something to be celebrated, and that women artists are still the underdogs in a male dominated system. It gave me the impression that any achievements "women" artists have made, whether personal, artistic, professional or otherwise, were not necessarily arrived at because of talent, genius or artistic ability in and of itself. Rather these women accomplished what they did because they learned to cope with the rules of the game and adapted themselves to the restrictions of the system they found themselves in--in order to reach their goals.

With Marsha Hanen presented as its central example, this book left me thinking that women's only hope is to continue to learn to play by the rules, strive for and reach positions of power and then use that power to positively influence others to participate in making changes that would shift the system to one where all people can enjoy the opportunity to reach their full creative, artistic and human potential. If Marsha Hanen has done this, I would have liked to hear more about what challenges she faced, and what strides she made in forwarding this cause. But until a time is reached when more women, more members of minority groups and all who are marginalized have made this kind of impact on the current system and "woman" as a subjugated category, in particular, changes, then perhaps claiming women's "artistic essentialism," is a better and more strategic manoeuvre. Celebrating the achievements of "Women Artists" as "Artists" seems to be more complimentary than celebrating their achievements as "Women."