
A review of the academic discourses on gender and music on the one hand, and on electronic music composition on the other, might elicit the impression that the two fields carry mutually repellent charges.\(^1\) Despite the diversity of backgrounds and compositional interests among women electronic composers, their relative obscurity has made theorizing gender difference as a factor in electronic expression a somewhat intimidating task, especially considering the scarcity of analytic models that translate electronic sound across the technical/cultural divide in the first place. The negative polarities by which both women and electronics are routinely marked as artificial, charged as frauds in relation to claims to authentic musicality, have not helped matters. As a consequence, both women musicians and electronic noise-makers are still regularly sidelined by critics, educators and historians away from the major players, thwarted by the spin put on historical narratives by masculinist ideals of monumentality, originality, and naturalness.\(^2\)

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Though obvious exceptions exist (Clara Rockmore, Pauline Oliveros, sometimes Björk), the woman electronic musician remains somewhat of a nebula in the everyday purview of most music histories. Tara Rodgers's makes important headway in correcting this oversight by bringing these two already marginalized scholarly discourses together. In *Pink Noises*, Rogers shows how these discourses have been far from marginal in the lives and work of some of the most dedicated and imaginative musicians of the last half century. The book is a collection of twenty-four interviews conducted by the author between 2000-2008, surveying an eclectic international array of female composers, producers, and performers of electronic music, many of whom double as engineers and inventors. The musicians represented here come from all different casts: respected veterans are slotted alongside lesser-known upstarts; sound installation artists bump up against DJ’s. Their musics engage a dizzying diversity of aesthetics, from wailing feedback to delicate windscapes, chugging glitch-rock to disarming drone, soulful party house to basement Bhangra. Their collective geography is mainly limited to the U.S. and Europe, with concentrations around New York City and the San Francisco Bay Area; yet ties to Japan, Perú, Egypt and India lend the book a global scope. Accordingly, the collection reads just as colorfully as these artists’ eclectic practices, offering varied smatterings of insight into these women’s work, influences, political concerns and practical hurdles.

Rodgers positions *Pink Noises* as a feminist intervention in music historiography, and at the heart of the book’s mission lies the drive to restore a gender balance to standard narratives of electronic music making. Her accessible and comprehensive introduction to gender in electronic music historiography, in which she proposes “to emphasize the substance and diversity of work that has been accomplished by women” as a strategy of conspicuous display (p.17), sets up the book gracefully. The book’s interview-based format plays to this strategy beautifully, rewarding even the mildest of curiosities about the inspirations and ideas sustaining some of today’s most relevant women in music. Less a feminist manifesto than an open forum for mostly younger, lesser-known artists to sound off, the book’s strength lies in the way it airs a vital heterogeneity of viewpoints, ideas, and concerns within what’s commonly assumed to be a narrow sliver of the compositional community. Many of these musicians’ voices ring through vibrantly; their passions, quirks and reserves bounce off the page, often providing sweet overtones to the reading experience. Rodgers deserves credit for putting together a group that projects such a colorful medley of interests and issues.

As one might expect, the book’s greatest asset also turns out to be its primary shortcoming, since its multivocality, from a certain perspective, can just as easily come across as scattered focus. It’s practically inevitable that *Pink Noises*’s open expositional format only scratches the surface of any one of the wide range of practices covered, and precludes a uniformity of purpose that a more straightforward feminist intervention would require. Not that comprehensiveness should be a

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measuring stick for the book’s quality—indeed, comprehensiveness is a value whose importance cyborg-feminists have importantly called into question. Yet Rodgers sets the bar high in the book’s introduction, in which she ambitiously targets the masculinist ideologies that tend to guide the discussions surrounding electronic music. Among her stated goals, Rodgers wishes to make theoretical inroads into thinking about “how electronic music practices can destabilize binary categories of gender” (p. 4). She offers some provocative tidbits for further thought, rightly pointing out how commentators at least as far back to the Italian Futurists have relied on tropes of noise and silence to signify a certain masculine virility and cold, hard mastery behind electronic music development. Rodgers also mentions how the progression of production to reproduction is staged as patrilineal descent from the former to the latter; creation and aesthetic innovation are cast as heroic fertilization, only for the undervalued phenomenon of reproduction to maternally “carry” sound across time and space (p. 15). Unfortunately, her interlocutors are not optimally positioned to undertake this sort of interpretation within such a casual format. Even while much of their music discomposes these normativities with stunning originality, Rodgers’s questions more often yield basic biographical and material information than ideological and conceptual elaboration. The answers she receives are multifarious and thoughtful, but ultimately out of joint with the intervention on masculinist discourse she initially sets up.

As to be expected from such a diverse bunch, attitudes toward gender roles vary widely among the artists, ranging from disinterest to blunt outrage, and featuring many shades of indecision along the spectrum. Keiko Uenishi (“o.blatt”) bristles against the notion of being slotted as “unusual” in terms of gender (p. 271), while Pauline Oliveros advocates, as she has in the past, for the inclusion of women in canons, concerts, and classrooms whenever possible (p. 12). The members of Le Tigre approve of their placement in concerts alongside other feminists for the sole reason of shared ideology (p. 248), while Pamela Z expresses a combination of bemusement and annoyance at journalists’ reliance on gender when it comes time to compare her music to others’ (p. 223). And while Maria Chavez has no problem using her femininity as a tool in the occasionally shameless game of self-promotion (p. 102), Giulia Lola is far more motivated by the ostensible gender neutrality of the electronic machine, with its ability to move “way beyond hormones and tits and dicks and twats” and “not get caught up in bullshit” (p. 185). (Actually, one of few overriding features among these women seems to be the predilection not to deal with bullshit, although what counts as such is clearly relative between the women represented in this collection.) In any case, the commitment to representing partial knowledges and a vital

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4 Donna Haraway’s work has been influential in this regard; see Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” Feminist Studies 14, no. 3 (Fall 1988): 575-599.

5 One need look no further, for example, than Alex Ross’s dynamite The Rest is Noise, which tells the story of 20th-century music as a riveting series of violent bursts and quiet paens borne by men, with men, for men—with, of course, the occasional incursion of Salome; see Ross, The Rest is Noise (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

heterogeneity lends the book a dignified modesty. Decidedly irreducible to a singular perspective, *Pink Noises* insinuates not only the perversity of master narratives, but also the perversity of the proposition to challenge them as though these narratives did not harbor their own contradictions, however skilfully obscured.

Rodgers partitions the interviews according to topical focus, offering a lucid and metered sampling of the themes developed across popular and art electronic genres over the last fifty odd years. The format serves more of a loose organizational function than a programmatic one, as the interviews invariably depart from these topics to address both broader and narrower concerns. Most interviewees speak eloquently to the broad concepts guiding their practices, traversing topics such as memory and environmental space (Maggi Payne), nature and control (Annea Lockwood), or embodiment and impermanence (Laetitia Sonami) with ease.

Along the way, Rodgers relates fluently to the challenges of electronic composition and performance (no doubt in part thanks to her own activity as a composer), and conveys an intimate familiarity with the musicians’ practices. This occasionally lends a fascinating insider’s perspective into some less obvious facets of electronic musicking; for instance, in arguably the most compelling exchange of the pack, Rodgers engages Jessica Rylan in an extended back-and-forth about the aesthetics of interface design. Rodgers is unafraid to get technical, and the conversation blossoms as a result. Any readers who are resistant to what might seem at face like esoteric tech-talk might take it as an opportunity to imaginatively inhabit the sometimes obsessively detailed processes of decision-making that go into electronic composition. (I equally relish the ability for such interviews to undermine the preconceptions of those who still find the idea of a female tech-head oxymoronic.)

From an academic perspective, it also helps to keep in mind the salience of Rodgers's editorial project for non-scholarly audiences. In fact, *Pink Noises* may end up speaking more loudly to other musicians or potential noisemakers than to scholarly discourse. Most urgently, the book serves as a valuable inspirational resource for those women, girls, and future cyborgs who are curious to create electronic sound themselves. Indeed, if there’s one concern for gender that this book demonstrates soundly across the board, it’s that women are still rarely encouraged to develop technical skills in electronic composition and performance. Untrained women often find themselves lacking the interpersonal support structures generally available to men that would help cultivate interest in the study of electronic composition or sound production. Several interviews here speak to the rather unsurprising reality that women are often discouraged from investigating the production of electronic sound. Elaine Radigue, for instance, relates how Pierre Henry once discouraged her from forging her own creative path (“I considered you the best of my assistants, and look what you are doing!”). Pamela Z and Rodgers both relate how, decades later, little has changed, both having taught girls who learned more in a single class than “my boyfriend’s taught me for five years!” (pp. 59, 225). The near-ubiquity of this observation is striking. Support at every possible juncture, these women point out, is crucial—as Rodgers
observes, nothing less is at stake than “who has access to tools and opportunities for creative expression, and how women artists are represented in mainstream media” (p. 5).

At the same time, in the current digital milieu, when what counts as “mainstream” among different media is up for contestation, and access to creative software and web distribution is significantly wider than even a decade ago, the text-only format of *Pink Noises* might seem a bit quaint given the book’s subject matter and target audiences. The project in some ways belies its linked-in legacy, since *Pink Noises* flows directly out of the promise of digital media to bring people with similar interests together. In 2000, Rodgers established pinknoises.com, a platform for women electronic musicians of all stripes to collaborate with and promote each other and their work. The site foregrounded the question of gender in electronic music through interviews and writings by and for women, and provided a forum for professional, technical, and personal relationships to develop between girl musicians. The digital approach presaged later developments in social networking on the web, and continued a feminist legacy of DIY support, collaboration, and friendship-building.7 A multimedia site featuring audio for reference would have been an obvious and fairly inexpensive complement to the book, while its potential benefits to enrich readers’ understanding would have been exponential.8

As we move forward into 2010s, and the means to self-publicity become increasingly up for grabs, one might begin to observe how access to creative self-representation is transforming the way communities and support systems are built, with digital media both diversifying and fragmenting the playing field. As it stands, examples of many of these artists’ works are quite readily available online, albeit either tucked away in artist’s personal websites, or wading out in the sea of streaming audio and video on massive host sites like YouTube or Vimeo, practically mega-communities in themselves. Increasingly, the relative anonymity of these spaces of digital self-fashioning are making it at least a little easier for female electronic artists to present themselves to the public as they see fit. As tools become more and more accessible to the untrained, the bases for creative community are becoming less reliant on straightforward gender distinctions. Yet gender disparities, rather than disappearing, are desperately in danger of becoming buried under all the flashy interfaces. In a dialectical twist, the need for gender equality continues to press on the terms guiding public discourse, only now the gender script is simultaneously being written in code underlying the digital reproduction of everyday life. As digital media continue to shape the way music is created, consumed, and conceptualized, girls and women need the noise of educators more than ever to cheer on the pursuit of technical

7 I speak of all this in past tense, because the site itself is now Rodgers’s blog. On the history of DIY support in riot grrl subculture, see Marion Leonard, “‘Rebel Girl, You Are the Queen of My World’: Feminism, ‘subculture’ and grrl power,” in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 230-255.

training. To this end, I applaud Tara Rodgers for the admirable work she's put into *Pink Noises*. These voices now require—and deserve—a good deal of amplification.

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