

Peraino, Judith. 2006. *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

**Reviewed by Ivan Raykoff**

Hermaphrodites, sodomites, trannies, oh my! Like Dorothy in Oz, musicologists who embark on Judith Peraino's wide-ranging historical and theoretical odyssey will encounter a host of unexpected characters and a number of diverting entanglements before they return home, most likely gaining new and challenging perspectives on their own familiar musical lands along the way. In this expedition through certain still-uncharted realms, Isaac and Icarus meet up with Sappho, Streisand, and Sylvester, and all follow Foucault—certainly not the usual figures to populate an account of Western music history from mythic to modern times. Peraino's roadmap is inviting: the premise of the book, in part following Adorno, is the idea that music has always opened a space for ambivalence, productively serving the complexities of personal identity and subjectivity; at the same time it has also provoked anxiety, society's frequent response in trying to contain those complexities through categorical hierarchies and ideological superstructures.

In brief, *Listening to the Sirens* pursues a quest devoted to queerness, that is, a dynamic of questioning the established cultural assumptions that regulate sexual identity and desire. Music lends itself well to such an interrogation, Peraino argues, because it “demarcates a space and time wherein gender and sexuality lose clear definition” (7). An impressive and expansive range of case studies demonstrates music's potential to subvert normative categories, and to represent (often through subtle means) constructs of identity and subjectivity that do not conform to hegemonic models. Thus music can facilitate resistance as well, a potential role that numerous composers, performers, and listeners have harnessed by using music as a tool for personal expression and cultural comment. As an innovative framework for these case studies, Peraino develops Foucault's concept of “technology” as a set of processes by which individual identity is produced, enacted, and transformed. Foucault posits four such categories—technologies of the self, of sign systems, of production, and of power—which serve as the signposts for each of Peraino's chapters. This is a smooth conceptual move for the book, since musicians are already familiar with the role of technique and practice in musical training, not to mention the idea of instruments and sound systems as musical technologies. In Peraino's expanded theoretical

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view, what gets composed and performed and listened to are not only sounds but identities, too—especially questioning and disruptive ones.

The first of these categories, “technologies of the self,” is developed across the first two chapters of the book. With this phrase Foucault refers to processes by which individuals can transform themselves—physically, psychologically, and even spiritually—in the pursuit of personal fulfillment. Peraino sees this transformative potential of “music as a self-practice” (12) as a response to two seemingly contradictory impulses: desire (or the hedonistic urge “shaping the self through excessive desire”), discussed in chapter 1, and discipline (or the ascetic urge demonstrated through self-control and renunciation) in chapter 2. Though contradictory, one urge stimulates the other: “The high tension between these two facets of music is perfectly represented in the image of Odysseus strapped to the mast of his ship in order to listen to the Sirens’ song” (13). Following Judith Butler, Peraino ties this story to Louis Althusser’s notion of interpellation, “an irresistible calling into subjectivity” (3), provoked by surrounding social and ideological forces. One becomes a subject when hailed (for example, “Hey, you!”)—an encounter inviting self-acknowledgement (“I think ‘I’ am being called”) or self-questioning (“Who, ‘me?’”) or perhaps even resistance (“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that”). Each of these responses is a function of listening to a call, the way Odysseus listened to the Sirens’ song—and the way, when we listen to music, we identify with it because it “speaks to” us (or we reject other music because it doesn’t). In Homer’s account, our mythic hero pursues his transgressive desire to hear the Sirens’ dangerously seductive music, yet finds a way to discipline his ecstatic listening with a bit of kinky bondage in order to resist its destructive power and eventually return home to his wife and child. Thus goes the heteronormative happy ending, but Peraino proposes another interpretation: Odysseus “gives in to a sexualized self-curiosity and, importantly, a desire to become otherwise, to question and to be questionable, to risk self-obliteration in music. This is a desire to become queer to oneself” (18) through a kind of listening that transforms the self physically, psychologically, and even spiritually.

After this brilliant theoretical opening, Peraino launches into a virtuosic survey of musical-sexual associations derived from ancient Greek culture and early Christian times. “Dionysian catharsis,” “Apollonian control,” and “sexual Pan(ic)” are three familiar constructs of Western culture based on musical practice and philosophy, and Peraino unpacks these with impressive clarity and depth, discussing their varied implications of gender transgression and sexual license. Orpheus, Sappho, and the Muses also figure into this trajectory of same-sex eroticism and “excessive musical self-practice” (37), which finds its opposition in the pronouncements against music’s destabilizing potential

by Plato and, later, St. Augustine. Plato's anxieties about music and social order continue to resonate in the present era, as Peraino notes with a nod to Allan Bloom's paroxysm over Mick Jagger's ambiguous sexuality and to the 1997 US Senate hearings on "music violence" (discussed more extensively later in the book). In the case of Augustine, music enacts another technology of the self as it provokes "an incessant questioning of desire and motive" (39), and Peraino offers the intriguing argument that Augustine considered unison singing a remedy for the excessive sensual pleasure associated with song and music's corporeal engagement. If Augustine's concern is physical arousal, Hildegard of Bingen's is spiritual arousal. Peraino continues with a consideration of the writings and compositions of this mystical twelfth-century abbess, asserting that her musical theology afforded a means of negotiating the confines of virginity, another technology of the self, such that "singing cooled and disciplined virginal ardor as it substantiated (and instantiated) virginal modesty" (51). Singing also channels disruptive desire in the secular realm of medieval troubadour culture. Peraino's expert reading of language, poetic structure, and musical meaning in the songs of Arnaut Daniel reflects Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of male homosocial bonding, in that "the circulation of desire . . . flows from the troubadour through the conduit of the lady and song (or the lady as a cipher for the song) to his male patron or . . . [to] his rival troubadours" (65).

All that in just chapter 1! Next the focus shifts to discipline and disclosure (enacted through confession) as tools for self-knowledge, and Peraino's case studies in chapter 2 are drawn from the music of Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky and Benjamin Britten. By this period queer desire is more readily acknowledged as an aspect of music and musicality, at least in the observations made by sexual psychopathologists (for which Peraino provides a handy summary from Karl Heinrich Ulrichs to Sigmund Freud), and "music becomes itself a mode of confession, evidence corroborating homosexuality" (70). Questions of whether and how Tchaikovsky's sexual identity might be reflected in his music have been investigated by other scholars. Peraino also takes this path, only to suggest instead that the lamenting finale of the Sixth Symphony has something to do with the sad end of the composer's relationship with his benefactress Nadezhda von Meck. More intriguing, however, is Peraino's interpretation of the two different orchestrations of the movement's opening lament figure: the angular interlocking voice leading of the first iterations as compared to the smoother and more typical arrangement of the same figure later in the movement. The first communicates complexity and conflict, the other coherence and conformity. Extrapolated to the context of sexual psychology, the first seems "queer," the other "straight" (92). Considering this to be more a matter of how the music looks on the page

and how it feels to play rather than how it actually sounds, Peraino regards the underlying distinction as one of private versus public identification. In this light Tchaikovsky's compositional and notational decision becomes a confessional statement, "the disclosure of something unspeakable" (92), a move from secret agony to open resolution.

One of the most rewarding subplots in these two chapters is Peraino's acknowledgement of the significance of performance itself in conveying musical meaning. In the case of Tchaikovsky's strange counterpoint, the seating arrangement of the nineteenth-century orchestra may have facilitated an audience's comprehension of the opening's stereophonic effect of sonic dissociation. Performers, too, may have felt the physiological tension of the opening leaps which are later resolved into simpler step-wise motion. Here one is reminded of Augustine's interrogation of aural pleasure, where "singing *quasi una voce* provides a solution to the problem of bodily engagement with music" (43). Peraino suggests that in the case of Hildegard von Bingen, "the homosocial communal performance of these chants, which described, celebrated, and enacted a type of exclusive female sexuality, unleashed erotic power among the participants" (50). Following Julia Kristeva on incantation and incarnation, the author notes that certain troubadour songs "use metaphors that equate the act of singing (*cantar*) with loving (*amar*) and composing (*trobar*)" (54), and that their performance for an all-male audience (and not the unattainable idealized female beloved) implied an exchange of desire among men alone. The significance of performance also returns repeatedly in subsequent chapters of the book, for example in Peraino's engagement with the role of music videos (such as those by Madonna) in conveying queer meanings through contemporary popular music.

Chapter 3 deals specifically with Foucault's "technology of sign systems," which involves the development and implementation of symbolic meanings as determined by power relationships. Peraino considers three musicians who function as icons of queer identity—Judy Garland, Melissa Etheridge, and Madonna—in terms of how they can be seen (and heard) to contradict heteronormative systems of gender and sexual identity. The theoretical background here (on signification, performativity, melodrama, and the "lesbian phallus") is dense and sometimes murky, but the three case studies demonstrate a consistent thesis on the dynamics of queer fandom: "The relation between the celebrity and his or her fans is one of resemblance, or the desiring of such, psychically enacted through identification or emulation" (113). In this way such popular public performers, whether straight or queer themselves, "serve as strategies of self-representation for gays and lesbians" (110).

As Peraino argues, gay men adored Garland because she appeared simultaneously tragic and heroic—in other words, melodramatic—and demonstrated through her real-life career as well as in her screen roles the qualities of resistance and resilience that were desperately needed in the pre-Stonewall era. (Three of Peraino's claims seem too strong, however: "Garland's victimhood and emotionalism represented subversiveness only to urban closeted gay men," 110; "She signified the whole condition of male homosexual identity in the mid-twentieth century," 120; and she "held no meaning for self-identifying queers of the 1990s," 110.) Out-and-proud Etheridge represents "the lesbian in a continual orbit around heterosexual subjectivity" (150)—an abject state of exclusion—but the singer also assumes "phallogocentric signification" through her heartland-rock style, candid lyrics, edgy delivery, and vocal quality variously described as "raucous," "lusty," "smoky," "husky," etc. As Peraino sees it, Etheridge demonstrates penetrative power as she performs "the idealized entry into normalcy" (150), having "earned a guest pass into the patriarchy" (143). (To be fair, Garland has a butch moment too: in *Summer Stock* she displays "masculine cool" in her famous "Get Happy" number, ending up "a sultry cross-dressing dominatrix," 123–24.) Madonna, not surprisingly, represents queer liberation, enacting "an ideal of gender and sexual fluidity" (150). These three female musicians present a rich and complex comparison of queer identification strategies, and it would be instructive to apply Peraino's approach to particular male musicians as well (perhaps Liberace, Elton John, and Freddie Mercury would make apt parallels).

In chapter 4, demonstrating Foucault's notion of "technologies of production," Peraino examines how lesbian and gay music trends of the 1970s reflected contemporary socio-political identities as they were constructed by the recording industry, radio broadcasting, and the disco DJ. The focus here is on feminist women's music produced by lesbian-run firms such as Olivia Records, and on popular mass-produced disco hits by the Village People. In the case of disco, which has always been associated more with hedonism than heroism, Peraino sees a profit-driven phenomenon promoting aspects of masochism, misogyny, racism, and "the overproduced masculinity of gay macho" (184) that seems characteristic of the urban "butch" or "clone" persona, an apolitical assimilationist identity productively challenged by Sylvester, the openly gay African American disco star who sang in an effeminate falsetto. While lesbian women's music navigated other tensions reflecting the divergent assumptions and goals of the various feminist movements of the time, it generally presented an aesthetic model that de-emphasized sexuality in favor of "consciousness-raising and culture-building aspirations" (194). Despite their various shortcomings, Peraino suggests, both disco and

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women's music were set in productive opposition to the hegemony of straight mainstream rock, but the latter more clearly served as a form of resistance linking music with the emerging leftist politics of gender and sexual identity through its "consciousness-raising" motivations (194).

While production and distribution of record albums is the thread that ties this chapter together, another application of Foucault's idea occasionally surfaces throughout: the significance of musical instruments themselves as technologies of homosocial community. The distinction between acoustic versus electronic instruments is familiar from discussions of the political connotations of folk music versus the technological materialism of commercial pop; Peraino occasionally suggests that this dichotomy might also inform the production of queer identities through instrumental sounds and performance practices. If the aggressive electric guitars and driving drumbeat of "cock rock" signify patriarchal power structures, disco's synthesized beats and strings might represent the standardized and artificial masculinity of macho clone culture. By the same token, Meg Christian's classical guitar stylings or the low-tech acoustic ensemble on Alex Dobkin's *Lavender Jane Loves Women* (featuring "warm cello and flute countermelodies that engage musical codes of pastoral innocence with a hint of classical music stuffiness," 162) could reflect certain political attitudes behind women's music in their aura of "authenticity" and earnestness (today considered mere sentimentality). Attention to instruments as technologies of production would complement Peraino's consideration of performers' vocal quality as a vehicle of queer identity elsewhere in the book, and would also provide a clearer context for the intriguing examples of song-remakes Peraino mentions in passing: Meg Christian's recording of "Hello Hooray" compared to Judy Collins's folk or Alice Cooper's heavy metal versions (168), for example, or Two Nice Girls' folkish cover of Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze" (174).

The final chapter, on androgyny and other "interruptions" of heterosexual masculinity, feels a bit uneven in its range of examples as it tackles Foucault's notion of "technologies of power." With this category Foucault refers to external regulatory techniques or discourses that organize conduct (including sexual conduct) and discipline the body accordingly—the institution of marriage being one very familiar example. Peraino proposes the coming-out ritual, "a performance that interrupts other discursive practices that work to normalize heterosexuality," as a queer parallel to marriage that leads the subject "not into tidy identities through instituted channels, but rather into the messy contestations of sex and gender" (197). This alternative model of gender identity is already evident in a number of poems and songs from seventeenth-century England (many by Purcell) that Peraino uses to demonstrate a release from traditional power structures of masculinity and

marriage through homosocial bonding, homoerotic fantasy, androgyny, or hermaphroditism. Comparably, in one of Handel's early cantatas, the myth of Daedalus and Icarus provides a stage for "music's tactical deployment . . . in an erotic game of power between two unmarried men, patron and artist" (209).

Surprisingly, there is no discussion of castrati in this chapter, even though they would seem to be examples of "metamorphoses through music that immolate the masculine subject and bring out from its ashes something quite different: a new, indeterminately gendered identity" (229–30). In a preceding chapter Peraino briefly notes that "the phallic transfer to the voice, disruptive of heterosexuality, is most obvious in castrati, . . . whose genital 'power' was sacrificed to achieve a more penetrating voice of the female register" (135–36). The examples from late twentieth-century rock music covered in the remainder of chapter 5 might seem an awkward pairing to Purcell and Handel, but Peraino's chronological frame responds to Foucault's assertion that modern structures of sexual discourse originate in the seventeenth century and finally begin to unravel by the twentieth century. In our own era, real or fictional musical personalities such as Marilyn Manson or Dr. Frank N. Furter present "the emasculated body as an unlikely site of power and resistance" (243), while Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" temporarily disempowers the masculine rock subject, turning a "guitar hero [in]to [an] opera queen" (232). Perhaps Hedwig's incomplete emasculation, which leaves her with an "angry inch," qualifies her to be a modern-day rock castrato?

One terrific pairing in this final chapter is the comparison of Plato's concerns about music's potential to unravel the social order with Senator Joseph Lieberman's complaints, over two thousand years later during the US government hearings on "music violence," about Marilyn Manson and other performers whose music promotes "sexual perversity" (246). This vignette returns the reader full circle to the journey's beginning in the Classical past. Music, as Peraino amply demonstrates, has long provided spaces and techniques for communicating and celebrating the degrees of ambivalence that accompany identity and subjectivity in any person's real-life experience. A remarkable scholarly achievement, *Listening to the Sirens* inspires one to listen more closely to the provocative music of these in-between places.