

Power and Equity in the Academy: Change from Within

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As an undergraduate music major interested in graduate study in music theory, I asked Joseph Straus, with whom I was taking an independent study in music theory and feminism, if he knew of any published work in feminist music theory. The only relevant writing he could think of was Susan McClary's "Pitches, Expression, Ideology," from the little-known journal *Enlittic* (1983). After reading this article (which I still reference when teaching Schubert Lieder), I corresponded with McClary, and we set up a meeting during her visit to New York to speak at the Brecht Forum/New York Marxist School. We quickly bonded over the fact that we both grew up in the same small town in Illinois—Carbondale—and that in graduate school we both tried desperately to expunge all traces of our distinctive southern Illinois twang.

As a first-year music theory graduate student at Harvard eager to bring feminist criticism to my newly chosen subfield, I established a study group for those interested in learning more about what then was a brand-new area of research. The Group for Gender Studies in Music (GGSM) met once a month to discuss the few publications then available in feminist music studies, analyze music by women composers, produce a concert of music by women composers in honor of Women's History Month, and plan a colloquium series. We found a sympathetic adviser in David Lewin, the senior music theorist on the faculty, and I secured funding from Radcliffe College and several other sources to pay for honoraria and travel for our four invited speakers. Lewin generously wrote a check as seed money to support our group when our request for department funding for our activities was turned down. When I met with the department chair about possible support for GGSM, I was asked to supply a list of names of those who attended our meetings, ostensibly to establish the level of student interest in the group. Our group was more controversial than I had anticipated and I wondered whether there would be negative consequences for anyone involved. (I did not comply with the request for names.) Without support from the department, we could not internally process the donations we received, and had to open an account at a local bank.

Meetings of the Group for Gender Studies in Music were very well

Current Musicology

attended by curious graduate students in music theory, musicology, and ethnomusicology. Word of our colloquium series, advertised in hard-copy posters I prepared with my dot-matrix printer in the days before Facebook, Twitter, and e-mail somehow reached Professor Judith Tick at Northeastern University and Dr. Hugh Morgan Hill, also known as Brother Blue. Dr. Hill was a playwright and storyteller based in Cambridge who had earned a doctorate in storytelling from Union Graduate School (Grimes 2009). He attended McClary's GGSM colloquium on Laurie Anderson, work she developed into a chapter in *Feminine Endings* (1991), and he took McClary aside to comment on the significance of her speaking about Anderson within the staid wood-paneled seminar room in Harvard's historic Paine Hall.¹

While many of my fellow graduate students welcomed the opportunity to engage with this new area of study, most of the faculty did not. Apart from Lewin, no faculty member ever attended a GGSM meeting and few attended our public colloquia, despite the prominence of the speakers we scheduled, including musicologists McClary and Paula Higgins, music theorist Joseph Straus, and composer and theorist Pozzi Escot. Although I had made it clear in my applications to PhD programs that I was determined to bring feminism to music theory, my attempts to initiate thinking at Harvard about gender, feminism, sexuality, race, and music got serious pushback. One graduate student relayed that his adviser mentioned to him that I should not be organizing numerous events he didn't have time for, because when he didn't attend, everyone would wonder why he wasn't there.

The department, and the field, were not ready in 1990 for such research directions.² During her visit to GGSM, McClary pointedly told me, "it doesn't have to be this way" (i.e., being miserable in graduate school). While taking a leave of absence from Harvard, I spent a glorious year at the University of Minnesota studying with McClary in the School of Music and with Richard Leppert and Lisette Josephides in the interdisciplinary PhD program in Comparative Studies in Discourse and Society. Working with these cutting-edge scholars and superb teachers proved to be an antidote to my disastrous first year of graduate school.

At Minnesota, McClary was a magnet for a cohort of smart, curious, imaginative, and fun graduate students who were all interested in possibilities for new scholarship that brought critical theory, including feminist theory, to the study of all sorts of music, from Beethoven to Madonna, Monteverdi to Prince. McClary's professional home is often assumed to be musicology, but many of us who have PhDs in music theory consider her to be a theorist. She has always insisted on thinking about how structure

and processes are an integral part of the critical questions she raises about representation, narrative, tropes, and musical meaning, viewed through various lenses including gender and sexuality. I took two seminars with her—one on Monteverdi's madrigals and another on music and postmodernism. The paper I wrote for the latter seminar turned into probably the most widely read piece I've published, my article on representations of East Asian women in music by John Mellencamp, David Bowie, and John Zorn (Hisama 1993). After Bowie's death in 2016, I received calls from journalists who located that article from 1993 and wanted me to comment on Bowie and racism (Tam 2016 and Tandon 2016).



At the end of my year at Minnesota, McClary told the students who were working with her that she would be leaving to teach at McGill University. I ended up completing my PhD in music theory with Straus as my advisor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, writing a dissertation on feminist analysis of music by American women composers (Hisama 1996).

Going on the job market in music theory with a dissertation that engages with music outside of the canon using new methods of analysis can be a very stressful process, and being a person of color and a woman in fields that remain stubbornly male-dominated and very white compounds the already challenging experience of a campus interview.³ A recently launched graduate student-led initiative, Project Spectrum, aims to address problems of diversity in music studies, to “explore why many people marginalized by their race/ethnicity, gender, and/or sexuality continue to have difficulty in finishing graduate degrees, attaining gainful employment, and receiving tenure within all fields of music studies” and “to develop concrete tools to inspire systematic change within these fields” through conferences and other activities (Project Spectrum 2018)⁴. In 2016, music theory and composition secured the distinction of being the field in the humanities that produced the lowest percentage of women PhDs (Patel 2016). Music theory's acute imbalance as regards gender and race in the STEMiest of the music subfields is, I think, related to its sustained resistance to considering issues of gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, and other identifications in scholarship and professional development.⁵ Music theory's lack of engagement with these issues has led to a number of promising and established women and people of color to leave music theory for the more welcoming shores of musicology or to leave music studies altogether.

After a few years on the tenure track teaching theory at a Big Ten university and one year as a Visiting Assistant Professor at a small liberal

arts college, I was hired as the new director of a well-established research institute, the Institute for Studies in American Music (ISAM) at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York (CUNY) with an appointment that was half administration and half teaching.⁶ My administrative and fundraising experience in the academy at the time consisted of my work as President of the GGSM at Harvard and as assistant to the conductor and scholar Maurice Peress for his project re-creating three historic concerts that he presented at Carnegie Hall (Pareles 1989).⁷ I had also picked up some grant writing and arts administration experience as an undergraduate student working part-time for the Twyla Tharp Dance Foundation, the Reading Reform Foundation, and the Women's Research and Development Fund, a grants office for women faculty members that came into being after CUNY lost a \$7.5 million class action sex discrimination lawsuit (McFadden 1983).

One of my missions as ISAM director was to provide a forum for research that presented bold new perspectives, especially from emerging and independent scholars, given the dire state of the job market and the attendant intense competition to publish, conditions I had experienced myself as a graduate student and untenured faculty member. In my first column published in ISAM's biannual newsletter, I noted that "in these tough times, it is critical that [younger scholars and independent scholars] receive our support and recognition—especially in the early years of their careers—through publications, performance opportunities, and residencies" (Hisama 1999). As a senior college in the CUNY system, subject to state budgets and political winds from the state capital, Brooklyn College had very little funding for *anything*; for any projects we dreamed up, we had to secure outside funding, and I applied for grants regularly.

Early in my directorship, I organized with my colleague and Senior Research Associate Ray Allen the conference *Ruth Crawford Seeger: Modernity, Tradition, and the Making of American Music*, in honor of the centennial of the avant-garde composer and folk music advocate (Allen and Hisama 2001). We hosted over thirty speakers, including composers Pauline Oliveros, Christian Wolff, and Ursula Mamlok and historians Benjamin Filene and Michael Kammen. Two evening concerts featured two of Crawford's children, Mike Seeger and Peggy Seeger; her stepson Pete Seeger; and new music aficionados Marilyn Nonken, Sarah Cahill, Margaret Lancaster, and Dora Ohrenstein. The conference was, and still is, one of the few scholarly conferences to focus on the work of a woman composer and/or musician.⁸ A volume of a dozen essays from the conference was published a few years later (Allen and Hisama, 2007). Several authors in the collection have received tenure since the publication of their essays.

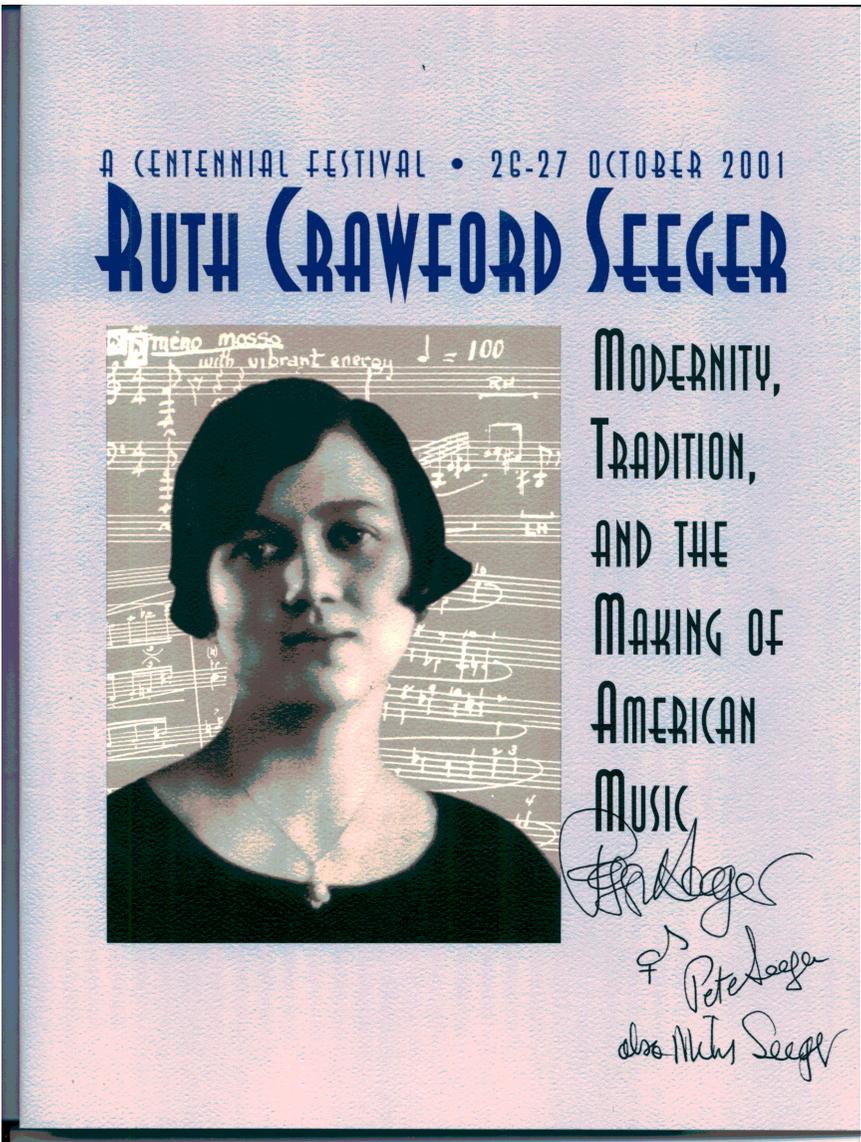


Figure 1: Conference Booklet Cover, Ruth Crawford Seeger: Tradition and Experiment in American Music. Brooklyn: Institute for Studies in American Music, 2001. Designer: Yuzuru Sadashige.



Figure 2: Webpage for Roundtable sponsored by Graduate Workers of Columbia University, October 2015.

Mike Seeger's and Peggy Seeger's agents requested different amounts for their participation, with Peggy Seeger's contractual fee a full 25% less than her brother's. Firmly committed to the belief that women and men should receive equal pay for equal work, I would not pay Peggy less than Mike, and, armed with support from the Edward T. Cone Foundation, I offered to pay her an additional 25%, explaining to Peggy and her agent that she should receive the same amount as her brother for doing exactly the same work—speaking on a panel and performing in the evening capstone concert. (It was probably the first time a presenter had offered this agent to pay *more* than the requested amount.)



After teaching for six years at Brooklyn College, where I received tenure in 2003, I was invited to apply for a senior position in music theory at Columbia University, and I began teaching in the Department of Music in 2006. I have been active on the Executive Committee of Columbia's Institute for Research on Women, Gender, and Sexuality (IRWGS), serving as its Director of Graduate Studies. In 2015, a graduate student who took my Feminist Pedagogy graduate seminar in IRWGS, Andrea Crow, invited me to a public roundtable organized by the Graduate Workers of Columbia, GWC-UAW Local 2110, a union for graduate employees from across the university. The roundtable was part of *We Are Workers: Graduate Worker Day of Action*, held on October 15. I attended the event to support

Crow and Alyssa Green, another student from the seminar, and to learn more about the growing unionization movement on campus.

The panels were informative, with remarks from students, union members, and politicians. As a former unionized faculty member in the Professional Staff Congress, Local 2334 of the American Federation of Teachers, I am acutely aware of the many positive contributions a union makes to university life. Although I had been mindful of the need to recognize work by graduate students as teaching assistants and stand-alone instructors, it struck me while listening to the GWC roundtable that departments' regular requests of graduate students to assist with non-teaching activities, such as conference and colloquium administration, is rarely paid. Such work by graduate students is sometimes assumed to be part of their education when it is indeed work.

In mid-October 2015, I was in the thick of organizing *Women, Music, Power: A Celebration of the Work of Suzanne G. Cusick*—a conference, evening concert, launch of a Festschrift issue of the journal *Women and Music* guest edited by Emily Wilbourne, and library exhibit—scheduled for that December (Women Music Power 2015). The dimensions of the organizational work were beginning to engulf me. I had, just a few days prior to the GWC workshop, issued an open call asking graduate students in musicology and music theory if any of them could assist me with the symposium planning and day-of activities. Nearly instantly, sixteen students committed to working at the conference, and six additional students in composition assisted with the concert, performed by the extraordinary new music group the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE).

The presentations at the GWC workshop prompted me to alter my fundraising efforts to include payment to the student workers. I wanted to at least pay a stipend and preferably a reasonable per-hour rate. What they were doing was *work*, and it should be compensated.

This was my strategy. In a number of my fundraising requests, I explained that graduate students in music would be devoting many hours to the event and asked for assistance paying them. I also emphasized that we wanted to offer an honorarium or reimbursement for travel/hotel expenses for the forty participants, all of whom agreed to speak and perform without any guarantee of funding given the importance of the event to them. The trickle of donations that started in October became a steady flow into December. My former employer Sandra Priest Rose from the Reading Reform Foundation, for whom I worked part-time as an undergraduate music student, sent a check with a note that she wanted to honor my professional accomplishments, and I fed that contribution back to the fund for graduate workers. One funder earmarked support for the work of symposium coordinator and then graduate student Lucie Vágnerová,

who transformed *Women, Music, Power* into a smoothly running, tightly coordinated series of events. I was able to budget in an honorarium per participant, and eighteen of those people donated their honorarium back to the students, independent scholars, underemployed speakers, and international travelers, giving us a substantial sum to work with. We also were able to pay more per participant if they requested a greater sum. In the end, we paid twenty-one graduate workers and one undergraduate for hundreds of hours of work at a rate well over twice the minimum wage.⁹

Women, Music, Power turned out to be wildly successful, with standing-room only audiences on both days of the symposium and at the evening concert. We were able to provide breakfast, lunch, and dinner with free registration to the public. Many people told me that it was the best conference they've ever attended, with a number of remarkable papers, a composition by Jenny Olivia Johnson premiered at the event, a new work by performer and ethnologist Tomie Hahn, and a mention in *New Yorker* music critic Alex Ross's blog (Ross 2015). The music critic Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim published a piece in the Sunday *New York Times*' Arts & Leisure section (2016) mentioning the symposium and exploring the idea of early music criticism's obsession with "vocal purity" and whiteness as possibly connected to notions of racial purity, an idea from Melanie L. Marshall's paper presented at the symposium and her article in the *Festschrift* (Marshall 2015).

We also ensured that *Women, Music, Power* was a child-friendly event, facilitating childcare arrangements for presenters, families, and audience members, and circulating information about events and places for children in the neighborhood. Some of the mothers who were participating or assisting shared their babysitters and one even offered the services of her visiting parents, who were willing to help care for children in her apartment. At our request, the university's Work-Life Office headed by Carol Hoffman gave conference attendees access to Columbia's lactation rooms. A space located near the music library served as a playspace and lactation room when participants viewed the library exhibit curated by musicology graduate students Jane Forner and Velia Ivanova about the twin histories of the Feminist Theory and Music conferences, founded in 1991, and *Women and Music*, launched in 1997.



The feminist writer and scholar Michele Wallace recalls that as an African American woman in a PhD program at Yale, she "was lost before I started. . . in comparison to the superbly well-educated, articulate whites who shared my classes" (1990, 97) and that for black students in such situations,

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Free and open to the public. Registration required.

Concert: 11 December 2015, 7pm
Italian Academy, Columbia University, 1161 Amsterdam Ave.
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Women, Music, Power is co-sponsored by the Department of Music and Dean for Humanities at New York University's Faculty of Arts & Science, Center for Ethnomusicology, Center for Gender and Sexuality Law, Columbia University Libraries, Department of Anthropology, Department of Philosophy, the Fritz Reiner Fund, the Heyman Center for the Humanities, the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society, the Institute for Research in African-American Studies, the Music Performance Program, and the Society of Fellows in the Humanities at Columbia University, and the Canada Council for the Arts, Fonds de Recherche du Québec - Société et Culture, Women & Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture, and the Frederick P. Rose and Sandra P. Rose Foundation.

Figure 3: Symposium poster, Women, Music Power, December 2015. Designer: Elliott Cairns.

Current Musicology

their only form of protest is “dropping out” (168). My form of protest as a female graduate student of color in a field dominated by white men, to paraphrase Wallace, was to transfer. In reflecting upon the precarity of my own education and early years of my career, I have often recalled Wallace’s experiences and words. Of the few women and students of color who were my peers in music theory doctoral programs, a significant number left the program. Others earned the PhD and then disappeared from the field because they never got a job or fellowship, changed career tracks because of spouse and family (Flaherty 2017), or experienced difficulty gaining tenure or finding a hospitable working environment.

My own career trajectory, starting with my first year of graduate school to my current position as a full-time tenured faculty member, could have turned out quite differently. Although I never entertained the thought of dropping out of graduate school and was determined to earn a PhD *somewhere*—and in my chosen field of music theory—there were many times when I wondered if I would ever find full-time employment in a university. The skill set I developed through a series of part-time jobs as an undergraduate and graduate student trying to make ends meet became instrumental in my later work as an administrator and faculty member.

I share these experiences in the hope that they might prove encouraging to graduate students who are seeking employment and career satisfaction, and that they serve as possibilities not only for those pondering alt-ac career tracks but for those who hope to change the balance of power and equity in academic life from within.

Notes

This essay developed from presentations made at *Practicing Utopia: Feminism and Activism in Institutional Contexts*, a conference organized by Andrea Crow and Alyssa Greene, Institute for Research on Women, Gender, and Sexuality, Columbia University, February 2016 and the Session on Mentoring and Diversity, Committee on Diversity, Society for Music Theory Annual Meeting, Arlington, VA, November 2017; and an invited response to the Inaugural Women and Gender Endowed Lecture by Susan McClary, American Musicological Society Annual Meeting, Rochester, NY, November 2017. I thank Suhne Ahn, Laura Ciolkowski, Andrea Crow, Suzanne Cusick, Aldona Dye, Jenna Freedman, Nalini Ghuman, Alyssa Greene, Robert Hatten, Danny Jenkins, Marti Newland, Carmel Raz, J. Griffith Rollefson, Joseph Straus, Victoria Tzotzkova, Tom Wetmore, and the late Anne Gefell for their helpful remarks.

1. For a history of Paine Hall, see Brinkmann and Bannatyne (2010).
2. As of Fall 2018, Harvard has not offered a seminar in gender studies and music. Personal communication with Anne Shreffler, San Antonio, TX, November 2018.
3. I outline some of these experiences as a job candidate in Hisama (2016). My dissertation advisor, Joseph Straus, heard all such interview experiences as they unfolded, lending a sympathetic ear and accepting me as an advisee after I had to transfer twice.

4. Papers by Robin Attas and Patrick Nickleson, Anaar Desai-Stephenson, and Michael Uy discussed at the AMS seminar *On the Academic Pipeline: Tenure, Pedagogy, and Coalition* (Hisama and Santana 2018) explored decolonized music pedagogy, diversity in modes of academic music discourse, and expanded employment possibilities for PhDs in music.
5. According to the 2018 statistics prepared by Jenine Brown, the field of music theory is 84 percent white and 63 percent men (these numbers are based on self-identifications). See SMT Demographics, <https://societymusictheory.org/administration/demographics>.
6. In 2008, ISAM was renamed the Hitchcock Institute for Studies in American Music after its founding director, H. Wiley Hitchcock. See <http://www.hisam.org>.
7. I arranged for Peress's archive from the Carnegie Hall concerts—including scores, recordings, photographs, and correspondence, as well as other materials from his work with Leonard Bernstein, Duke Ellington, José Limón, and other artists and musicians—to be housed at Columbia's Rare Book and Manuscript Library, where it is now available to researchers.
8. More recent examples include *American Women Pianists-Composers: A Celebration of Amy Beach and Teresa Carreño*, Department of Music and Library Special Collections, University of New Hampshire, October 2017 and *Sound, Gender, and the Color Line: A Symposium and Celebration in Honor of Marian Anderson, Musician and Citizen of the World*, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Pennsylvania Libraries, October 2018.
9. In December 2015, the minimum wage in New York State was \$8.75 per hour. See *History of the General Hourly Minimum Wage in New York State*, Department of Labor, New York State (accessed July 2018), https://labor.ny.gov/stats/minimum_wage.shtm#content-anchor. Information on GWC-UAW Local 2110 is available at <https://columbiagraddonion.org>.

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Current Musicology

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