



## Feminist Music Theories—Process and Continua

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ABSTRACT: Feminist music theories can usefully include concepts of relationship, reflexivity, contextuality and subjectivity. These theories can support diversity and individual experience through celebrating performance and ritual, and can explore process along with structure. Two songs of Parton illustrate relationships of modality and tonality. The songs support comparison and contrast of culturally-accepted means of expansions of tonal centers. Twentieth-century poets such as Frost and Rushin illuminate relationships and the stress they can bring to the originators. Recent compositions and writings of Larsen and Tower add to our music theoretic concepts.

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[1] Discussion of the centralities of feminist music theory has been underway at every conference I have attended recently. Some of the most extensive feminist musical analyses have been undertaken by musicologists, as exemplified by McClary's analysis of Monteverdi, (McClary 1991, 35–52) and Citron's analysis of Chaminade. (Citron 1993, 145–164) Theorists are beginning to publish explicitly feminist music theories. The following are elements I consider relevant to formulations of a feminist music theory. Other theorists will have different parameters, engendering the strengths described by Doane and Hodges 1987 (140– 141): “because there are many feminisms, the movement does not depend on the fortunes of a single leader or group. We are accustomed to think in terms of the powers associated with accumulation and identity rather than the powers associated with dispersion and rupture precisely because the conditions of discourse, based on binary oppositions that preserve identity, insist that we do.” My current formulation will change. I write now at a point within the process of concept development. No doubt, I will have moved past this point by the time *Music Theory Online*, our quickest means yet for framing the discourses among us, is published. This description forms no phallographic inscription on tablets of silicon, but serves as a signpost on the aural journeys being mapped out by Marvin (1994).

### Current Centralities in Feminist Music Theory

[2] Current feminist music theories can be more supportive of us all if they include men, as theorists, composers, musicians. In addition, these concepts should include music, musicians and theories heretofore marginalized in the discourse of our discipline. Feminist theories can encompass supplementary ideas such as:

1. They can be *relational* to current theoretical stances, while deconstructing them. Hekman's concepts of Derrida's work can be useful here:

“Feminist deconstruction entails a radical restructuring of western thought and practice, a fact that Derrida both

acknowledges and explicates in his work. . . . This discourse speaks in a multiplicity of sexual voices; it is a discourse which has no center, neither masculine nor feminine, yet does not erase either the masculine or the feminine” (Hekman 1991 175).

2. They are *reflexive* of women’s experiences, and will circumvent imposing unilateral interpretive judgements. They will avoid framing musical theoretic discourses as private power relationships which impose the theorist’s interpretation on the music, as well as the inverse, where the music theory is said to be impelled by the force of musical masterworks.
3. They can be *contextual*, recognizing the influences of culture and history.
4. They can be *supportive* of diversity and individual experience. Thus, recent research suggesting fundamental differences in hearing music, such as those people with and without absolute pitch, contains feminist aspects (baczewski\_killam\_1992).
5. They can be *subjective*, avoiding false objectivity through acknowledging the personal situatedness of our individual epistemologies.
6. They can be *process-oriented*, including concepts of drama and myth, noting that myth includes rather than excludes truth, encompassing more of human experience than “simple” truth (Killam 1993, 230–251).
7. They can *celebrate* multiple relationships between music, music theory and the cultures in which these relationships are developed. Feminist theories of music can acknowledge the importance of performance and ritual in our mutual empowerment.

### Analytical Applications

[3] As an example of musics and theories to be included in our discussions, I suggest two songs written (and recorded) by Dolly Parton. The first, “Down from Dover,” documents the desertion of a young woman’s lover and the death of her child. The music is modal and chantlike, with few clear dominant-tonic relationships, depending instead on its horizontal melodic relationships. Parton modulates up a minor second for the last verse, claiming an authenticity for her description of the events. (Parton 1993) The second song is the recent hit, “I Will Always Love You,” written also by Parton and recorded by her in 1973. (Parton 1993) This latter work has received wide recent currency in performances by both Parton and Whitney Houston, encompassing both Anglo and Afroamerican performance practices. This latter song is securely tonal, with the first cadence sliding from a preliminary plagal to an authentic half, prolonging and supporting what in retrospect is heard as a second scale degree, which achieves final resolution only at the close. Houston’s most-widely played recording of the song modulates up a step for the last verse, as does Parton’s “Down from Dover.” Both songs present tonalities that stretch our concept of “beginning and ending in the same key” in a way quite culturally acceptable, particularly in religious celebratory music. Both Houston’s and Parton’s performances combine elements of ritual and myth into their musical interpretations of texts, one mourning the death of love and the other proclaiming an eternity of love and caring of one human for another.

[4] Recent music literature which incorporates concepts of women’s voices include Larsen’s *Missa Gaia*, and Tower’s *Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman IV*, premiered during the 1992 Society for Music Theory Conference, with several music theorists in the audience. Those attending will remember the rhythmic and timbral complexity of Tower’s music, as well as her explication of her compositional intent in her presentation to the audience prior to the performance. These latter works by Tower and Larsen need fuller analysis than can be provided by me at this preliminary point along the continuum of development of feminist music theories. Larsen recently noted in a comment on women’s performance practices recently noted, “When Bessie Smith slides from a flatted third to a major third she’s not resolving *anything*, and we both know it” (Larsen 1994).

[5] As a point of temporary closure, I hope that the processes outlined in this article strengthen its readers. I hope this reading encourages more support for women, for music, for musicians, for music theorists, and for all that we bring to humanity. I evoke Robert Frost’s “Two Tramps in Mud Time,” where he summarizes,

My object in living is to unite  
My vocation and my avocation  
As my two eyes do one in sight. (Frost 1971, 114)

Yet, I acknowledge the anguish of Rushin’s “The Bridge Poem”:

I must be the bridge to nowhere  
But my true Self  
And then  
I will be useful. (Rushin 1993, 516)

The process of creation of new music theories can be lonely and painful: may we continue to assist each other along the multiple continua of our choices.

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