

Males Performing in a Female Space: Music and Gender in Young Adult Novels

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In a number of novels for young adults, the apparently gender-free act of performing music is connected surprisingly often with concepts of gender. How do these works define and encourage the construction of subjectivity, particularly male subjectivity? What does the connection between gender and music tell us about conceptions of gender, and what does it tell us about conceptions of music?

This project began when I noticed the similarity in two novels, both about young boys, both intended for young adult readers, and both by women: Ursula Le Guin's *Very Far Away from Anywhere Else* and Suzanne Newton's *I Will Call It Georgie's Blues*. Like many other young adult novels, these two are about boys who feel different—at odds with the values of their family, especially their fathers, who expect them to act conventionally, and with their contemporaries, who expect a different but equally unpalatable sort of conventional behavior. Also as in many other young adult novels, both boys work to keep the truth about themselves hidden, and find another world, a utopian place apart, where they are free to express their true secret selves.

What is noteworthy is that in both cases the separate secret place is not only connected with musical performance, but belongs to a female—in Newton a woman who secretly teaches the boy piano in her home, and in Le Guin a girlfriend who plays piano. In *Georgie's Blues* the boy feels his true self only at the piano, and in *Far Away* the girl's music is equated with the boy's actual secret fantasy of a separate world organized to his taste. Music connects the boys with an artificial family of like-minded people both dead and alive, composers and performers whom they feel more communion with than with their own actual families. For as the furtive activities of the secret place become known and the boys' actual families threaten to disintegrate, the public performance of music signals a different sort of harmony and wholeness; the boys acknowledge their rejection of their fathers' values and their adoption of the values of the female-connected family that music represents.

Several things intrigue me here: the peculiar coincidence of the discovery of music and the denial of fathers; the relation of music to a safe space away from a distressing world, a place that represents a paradoxical conflation of perfection and selfhood, both utopia and what one secretly actually is; and music's connection with femininity, a feminine order which a male chooses as an act of defiance against his father's conventional male values. These boys become triumphantly themselves by choosing the secret music of the female space over a silence or cacophony identified with the male authority that the world expects of them. A female music represents the essence of their presumably male selfhood.

Other young adult novels about performers make similar connections between music and gender. For instance, *Come Sing, Jimmy Jo*, by Katherine Paterson, is about a musician named James, who to begin with makes music only in his grandmother's house (another private space controlled by a woman). A male intruder into this space, an agent representing the commercial interests of the big world outside, forces the reluctant James to perform in public—the move that occurs near the end of the two other novels—where he learns to preserve the values of the female space even in a world at odds with them. But while *Jimmy Jo* makes the same connections among femininity, music, and private space, and between maleness and public space, it tells the next part of what appears to be a common story: what happens to a male performer *after* what now begins to seem like a gestation period, after the performer is born out of the protective private female space into a world where others, either males or women seduced by male values, claim him and try to control and change him. Furthermore, one of those others in *Jimmy Jo* is James's actual father, who tries to replace the man James has always lived with and thought of as his father, and who also feels allegiance to the grandmother's traditional music. As in *Far Away* and *Georgie's Blues*, this novel implies connections between the acceptance of music associated with a female and with a family one isn't actually related to and the denial of one's own real father. And also as in Le Guin and Newton's books, *Jimmy Jo* ends with a performance in the midst of family disruption that signals the triumph of a different sort of family, one created through music: James's mother may be having an affair with his uncle, the family group may be about to break apart, but James's singing and playing bring his audience into an unbroken circle of love.

The obvious questions raised here are these: Why is the performance of music opposed to conventional paternal male authority? And why is it associated with femininity and with spaces controlled by females?

A preliminary answer might foreground the simple fact of authorship.

In the minds of all these female authors, music is clearly a worthwhile endeavor, related to their own most positive values as writers/artists in a liberal humanistic tradition: transcendence, beauty, order, harmony, concern for and communion with others. It might also be a harmless wish-fulfillment fantasy for these authors to relate music and these other values to their own gender.

But common cultural assumptions support that relationship; these authors are merely taking for granted a powerful connection our societal values enforce between music and femininity, for—as in these novels—many teachers of music are indeed female, while a majority of professional performers and composers, especially of classical music, are still male. Furthermore, values associated with music are often identified with femininity and opposed to (theoretically) masculine values: sensitivity vs. toughness, soft emotions vs. hard-headed reason, the aesthetic sensibility vs. pragmatic common sense. Because musical males have been born with what their world defines as “female” gifts, they can express their gifts only by defying commonly assumed definitions of masculinity—by becoming a different and perhaps more traditionally female kind of male. The novels describe how they retreat from conventional male values to a space defined as female in which they can safely express their hidden, presumably feminine, gifts and then develop the courage to express them publicly.

The supposed femininity of a secret self is most apparent in *Jimmy Jo*, in which James’s music, called “comfort” music, represents a loving concern for his audience of a sort that is conventionally equated with femaleness; he sees these people “full of love, looking up at him . . . like little children on Christmas morning—waiting all full of hope for a present. And he had the gift” (178). Just as he was the object of his grandmother’s maternal concern and comfort earlier, he now becomes something like a consoling mother himself—perhaps specifically, in terms of the Christmas morning metaphor, like the ultimate symbolic mother, the Virgin Mary.

Yet paradoxically, the actual music these novels describe tends to be identified with males and masculinity: the classical composers in *Far Away* and the jazz artists *Georgie’s Blues* mentioned as symbolic peers, are all males; James’s comfort song is identified more with his grandfather than his grandmother. In theory, at least, the nurturing women in these novels merely provide a space in which the boys can discover their connections to traditions that, despite their difference from their own culture’s definitions of acceptable masculinity, are inherently masculine.

In other words, these novels present a shifty response to the question

how can you be both musical and masculine. On the one hand, you can't; you must accept and express your femininity. On the other hand, you can; in expressing that supposed femininity you will merely be acting like a genealogy of male musicians who actually represent your true spiritual family—you can act like a woman because these great men of the past did too.

In either case, masculinity is redefined; it is no longer the pragmatic, deliberately insensitive, anti-intellectual aggressiveness that we usually identify as machismo and understand as being driven and excused by male sexuality. Indeed, the denial (or simple disregard) of that sort of sexuality is a significant thread in all of these novels, most obviously in *Far Away*, in which Owen's misguided attempt to act as he assumes males conventionally do and try to have sex with the girl who nurtures his self-esteem is a prelude to disaster. He has introduced the wrong kind of masculinity into the safe, separate female space, a sexless and primarily maternal space whose safety and comfort depends upon its difference from usual assumptions about males; and he loses contact with that space and what we are meant to understand is his real self until he learns to deny his sexual aggressiveness.

In Newton, meanwhile, Neal's access to the free space of his teacher's house is equally threatened by conventional assumptions about male-female relationships: his family worries about what people will think, for after all, what interest could a boy possibly have in clandestine visits to a single female's house, except the obvious one? The most surprising thing about Neal, if he were actually a living male adolescent, might be the least surprising thing about him as a character in this sort of novel: he seems not only to be without any interest in sexuality, but without any concern about his lack of interest. That surprising absence makes the novel's triumphant victory of a form of masculinity at odds with conventional machismo easier, albeit less convincing.

In *Jimmy Jo*, James's similar lack of interest in sexuality is less surprising; he is only eleven. Nevertheless, the book establishes the superiority of a maternally concerned father with no obvious sexual interests over a mother and uncle whose inadequacy is defined in part by their apparently sexual interest in each other. And James also has a relationship with another nurturing male, an older black boy whose interest in him is nonsexual, and who offers him a safe place to escape from the turmoil of his life. So all the good males in this book—James, his father, and his friend—have no apparent sexual drive and offer a traditionally maternal form of comfort.

In all three books, then, the idyllic musical space controlled by a woman

is idyllic exactly because it offers anything but the conventional satisfaction of male desire; and the boys' eventual triumphant reentry into the world from that space defines a subjectivity for males disconnected from sexuality.

Traditional machismo often defines itself as individual power at odds with and repressed by conventional rules. In popular movies and in adolescent culture, real men have no patience with laws meant for beings less intensely alive and less powerful than themselves; they become gloriously free by rebelling against stultifying convention, a convention often represented by the suffocating power of women. These books play a paradoxical game with that idea. On one hand, these boys do become free by defying stultifying convention; on the other, the convention they defy is machismo, and they free themselves of it by expressing their true antimachismo selves in the adoption of traditionally feminine values.

At this point, ideas about music become particularly relevant—for music conventionally represents not just the free expression of emotion but also, and more significantly, order and harmony. Furthermore, the order and harmony of music parallel and even represent the conventional order and hierarchy of society. According to Jacques Attali, music, a system of signifiers with no specific signifieds, ultimately signifies merely the shape and structure of power in the society that produced it—the organizing patterns we give to all aspects of our lives from political systems to gender relationships: “listening to music is listening to all noise, realizing that its appropriation and control is a reflection of power, that it is essentially political” (6). Seen in this way, music is repressive: by transforming unstructured “noise” into coherent pre-existing patterns, it closes off the liberating possibilities of the noise that remains outside the ordering of music—the sort of “noise” also represented by machismo’s required defiance of societal and theoretically harmonious conventions.

The boys in these novels feel at odds with that kind of noise, not because it is anarchic, but paradoxically, because they perceive it to be conventional and therefore repressive of their true selves; in terms of a clichéd musical metaphor, they march to the sound of a different drummer. Le Guin’s Owen works hard to fit into the theoretically rebellious conventions of youthful machismo—to wear the right sort of jeans, tell the right sort of dirty jokes, do all the things that most offend adults; but he does so as protective coloring, to hide his true feeling of separateness from this ritualized behavior. Similarly, James and Neal work hard to seem like their peers in order to conceal their real and dangerously different selves from view, at least until they feel strong enough to rebel against normal adolescent rebelliousness and assert their individuality. Yet all

three boys find freedom and selfhood through their immersion in the ordered spaces of conventional music. In other words, there's a sort of sleight of hand going on here. By defining what usually counts for decidedly masculine rebellion as convention, these novels can define adherence to the conventional order and tradition represented by music as truly rebellious, truly freeing—and therefore, despite conventional assumptions, a truly masculine act of defiance.

Furthermore, all three novels compound the paradoxical nature of the boys' rebellion against societal convention by identifying the playing of music with the creation of and absorption into a different and more comfortable society—not just spiritual brotherhood with those in the past who created or performed, but also, a community created by the concern and compassion represented by musical performance itself. The music Natalie writes to represent Owen's private fantasy world signals her concern for and community with him; Neal's first public performance is of a piece he has created to represent his sympathy and concern over his brother Georgie's sadness; and we've already seen how James's music offers his audiences comfort. To rebel against convention and be yourself is to give yourself over to a healing music that comfortably connects you with others—even while it also disruptively pulls you away not only from common societal values but also from your own actual family, which the act of music-making helps to disintegrate. For in all three books, acceptance of one's place in a spiritual family defined by music and controlled by a maternal woman who is not one's actual mother requires the denial both of the territory controlled by a patriarchal father and of an actual mother oppressed within that territory. Neal, James, and Owen all deny their real mothers as well as their real fathers.

Not surprisingly, then, the space controlled by a woman in which these boys feel free to express and explore their music is womblike; the boys return to the womb in order to be reborn as sons of a different mother. It is as a womb that the female space can represent both utopia and selfhood: utopia in that it offers totally safe immersion in music, in a harmonious perfection that gives one pleasure; selfhood in that this immersion nurtures the development of the separate individual who eventually emerges from it. In these novels, the spaces where music is performed are equivalent to maternal female bodies.

In musical terms, the female space allows the sort of acquaintance with musical traditions and conventions that will eventually allow for creative self-expression; most obviously, Neal learns the techniques of jazz improvisation so that he can then create his own improvisations. All three boys become part of the spiritual musical community by absorbing and

then adding to its conventions. Because music is universally admired, these novelists can use the conventional association of music with gender as a means for defining a form of masculinity they personally approve of. If we ourselves also approve of it, we might laud these authors for their defiance of conventional definitions of masculinity and their separation of it from the aggressiveness of machismo.

On the other hand, we shouldn't forget the degree to which the nurturing, nonaggressive masculinity the boys in these novels achieve would be particularly desirable from a specifically maternal point of view. As proud acceptors of a spiritual mother's female values and in their developing nurturing skills, becoming maternal themselves, these are the sort of unthreatening, sensitive males women might like to mother. Caught in (or as the books would have it, freed by) the space of the music, they are ideal loving sons for their author-mothers.

Furthermore, the separation of acceptable masculinity from any genuine sort of rebellion means that male rebelliousness has been coopted here, in the service of a traditional form of liberal humanism, a great tradition of musical harmony and the mutual nurturance of like-minded souls that is surprisingly elitist and that might well be seen to sustain established and oppressive forms of power. At the very least, these novels confirm a hierarchy of taste and tradition that marginalizes and condemns all sorts of energetic "noise."

In order to test the universality of the patterns I discovered in these three novels, I looked for other young adult novels about young male performers. I found two that relate the pleasures of musical performance to private spaces controlled by female mentors. But interestingly, neither defines the space as idyllic, even though both novels are by women.

In Cynthia Voigt's *A Solitary Blue*, a boy lives in an oppressive non-musical space controlled by an apparently unfeeling father; he hides his true feelings and character, knowing or believing that expressing them would be wrong. He then visits a mother who left years before and who he hardly remembers. She lives in a female space, a family house where only women live; and there he finds his "self" in two senses. First he finds a history, a family heritage he hadn't known about, and second, he finds music. His mother has a guitar, and he learns to play it and thus express himself and his previously buried emotions.

So far, so good: it sounds like the usual pattern. But now Voigt plays a trick. On subsequent visits, the boy realizes the egocentric shallowness of his mother, and comes to appreciate the depths hidden by his father's silence; and finally, it's his mother he rejects, in favor of his actual father.

But significantly, not his mother's music: he continues to play guitar,

although on a superior instrument that his father purchased for him. It seems that his music—symbolic of his true selfhood—represents a combination of the male and the female. His mother can offer him only one half of what music is—the individual melody signalled by her name, Melody Greene, which is merely emotional anarchy without the order of rhythm and harmony and such represented by his father’s quiet life. Taking the emotional and self-expressive melody back home to his father’s place, Jeff learns how to combine it with the order and concern for others represented by his father’s house, and develops a subjectivity that in theory, it seems, integrates and balances all opposites.

I say “in theory” because this conclusion seems to represent merely a different version of the same dynamic I uncovered earlier: the cooption of an anarchic selfhood presumably represented by musical talent into a safely communal set of values. In rejecting his mother’s free-spirited egocentricity but accepting the music associated with it, the flowing female “melody” that defies the patterned structures of an oppressive masculine order, Jeff frees music from the antisocial dangers of anarchic self-expression. Because Jeff eventually learns to love the father he once felt to be oppressive, Voigt provides a somewhat more obvious version of the paradoxical game that all these novelists are playing with the contradictions in our conventional ideas about gender. On the one hand, the social order is conventionally identified with patriarchal control, and oppressive: conventionally opposed to it is the free spirit of anarchic music, the flow of melody—a female form of liberating energy. On the other, however, to be aggressively self-centered in one’s dealings with others, to be willful, is to express machismo, opposed to which is a theoretically feminine sense of concern and communion. Voigt allows Jeff to accept his mother’s freeness of spirit by denying its anarchy, his father’s rigid order by denying its oppressiveness. As in the other novels, a male expresses his independence from an oppressive male order not by refusing its oppression through defiant machismo, but by performing music emanating from a female space that transforms its oppressive order into harmonious communion. Once identified, through music, with the female, male rebelliousness is coopted by a social order now identified as harmonious rather than constricting. The mother keeps the child by pretending to free him.

Virginia Hamilton’s *The Planet of Junior Brown* is a book about a music performance that contains no music. There are two theoretically safely enwombing places controlled by women in this book, islands away from the ugly and difficult world outside in which Junior is meant to practice his art: his home and his music teacher’s house. But these are

not blissful islands. Something has gone dangerously wrong in both places, signalled by the fact that Junior cannot actually produce music in either of them. At home the keys of Junior's piano have been disconnected from the sounding board, so that the noise will not bother his mother; and his music teacher has had a breakdown and will not allow him near her piano. In both places, then, Junior merely goes through the motions, pounding the keys in silence, or beating out his lesson on a chair in silence. Junior must leave these sterile and constricting female spaces for a male-controlled space, in which a sensitive older man and a friend of his own age can offer him the nurturing he so desperately needs.

This sounds like it might be a reversal of the usual pattern; but there is no music in the male-controlled space either. This novel describes a topsy-turvy world in which children must act like parents and panic-stricken parents need and cannot get the nurturing usually offered to children, a world in which everyone is damaged, disabled, prevented from expressing their true selfhood—a world of noise rather than music. While the book ends with some small hope that Junior and his friends will survive, it is not optimistic enough to actually offer him the ability to be himself and perform this music.

In other words, Hamilton accepts the usual connections between music and selfhood, music and nurturing, music and perfection. She merely works to show how a cruelly damaging environment makes music and all it represents impossible.

Indeed, the degree of agreement in all these novels about the connections between the music of males and a nurturing, maternal femininity confirms the degree to which conceptions of gender infiltrate our consciousness, even in areas where we least suspect them. The connections these novels make between gender and music seem to have more to do with their authors' unconscious acceptance of common societal assumptions than with deliberate efforts to imagine new possibilities. Not surprisingly, then, I discovered that many other young adult novels which represent different combinations of gender of author and protagonist nevertheless replicate the same or similar connections between gender and music.

William Sleator's *Fingers* offers a reversal of the pattern. A male author describes the release of two boys with musical talent from the imprisoning control of their mother, who tyrannizes them and forces them to misuse their musical talents in support of her own ambitions. After a characteristic climactic disruption and fragmentation of this actual family, the boys move away from the oppressively claustrophobic spaces of the hotel rooms

controlled by their mother onto an island, a protective free space away from society that is controlled by a male who turns out to be not so much a father as a symbolic brother; he is the actual child of the composer who seems to be the spiritual father of the two brothers. The two boys move in an opposite direction from the ones we explored earlier: not from private expression in a safely separate space to public performance and acclaim, but from inharmonious public performance and hurtful lack of acclaim into an enwombing private space where they can exercise their talents away from the world and learn to be the harmonious musicians they have the potential to become.

Despite the gender reversal, the island sounds strangely like the female space of the other books: enwombing, isolating, protective, nurturing. So while *Fingers* seems to reverse the earlier connections I described between music and gender, it actually doesn't. Here, as earlier, music and musical mentors are maternal; the only difference is that here the enwombing maternal mentor is male, and the actual female mother is the one who is oppressively patriarchal and who expresses the values of a conventional masculinity. By reversing our conventional understanding of males and females, this novel by a man manages to replicate the same associations between the author's gender and music that we saw earlier in novels by women.

So does Bruce Brooks's *Midnight Hour Encores*, a novel by a male author about a female performer. The novel starts with Sibilance, a cellist, in a musical space controlled by her father: it is a good space, the ideal one achieved by male characters in female spaces in the other books; but she does not know how good it is, and believes that it constricts her musical development. So she seeks another father, a symbolic one—an older male cellist whom she believes has much to teach her. Ironically, she discovers that the cellist is in a space controlled by her actual mother, whom she has never before met—not only is her mother on the board of the institute where the cellist teaches, but even the physical space itself, the institute building, was designed by her mother's secretary.

At first, Sibilance believes that her mother represents not only musical space, but a personal freedom beyond the narrowly protective world in which her father has nurtured her; she has always imagined that her mother left her stuck-in-the-mud father because she was a free-spirited hippy. But Sibilance begins to understand differently, partially through her encounters with her mother's secretary. Employed by her mother since designing the institute building, he has done nothing else; he's clearly been neutered in his art by her control of him. (Indeed, in the light of the pattern I'm investigating here, this young man's condition can be

seen as a sort of dark parody of the utopian state experienced by characters like Neal and Jimmy Jo: caught in a musical space controlled by a domineering and devouring mother, he has lost his ability and even his desire to create.)

As a controlling and apparently emasculating woman, furthermore, Sibilance's mother has all the traditional patriarchal characteristics; she's not the liberated hippy Sibilance had imagined, but a wealthy real estate success, a woman of drive and power, and she believes she knows what Sibilance should do and be. Not surprisingly, then, Sibilance eventually rejects both this real mother and the would-be male musical master as oppressive of her true self; and in doing so, she learns to appreciate her father's nurturance of both her real self and her own form of music. As in *Fingers*, as in all the other novels, music must be nurtured in a space identified as opposite to conventional machismo; to be truly oneself, one must flee from the world of aggressive selfhood and self-seeking into a safe maternal space.

At the end, then, Sibilance learns this odd truth: her father is the better parent because he represents all the traditional female values—all those associated with female spaces in the novels about boys. Her mother must be rejected simply because she stands for all the traditional male values rejected in the other books. Sibilance rejects her real, female mother in favour of her truly nurturing male mother.

Interestingly, the events that form the central action of the novel are a replication of an earlier series of events. Sibilance's first cello teacher was a loving male who gave her space to be herself; then he died, and she had a female teacher who tried to control her. She comes to understand the nurturing virtue of the first, male teacher only by experiencing the negative female one; similarly, her experience of her mother teaches her to appreciate the nurturance her father.

That this is in some ways a return to a sort of womb is represented by the fact that Sibilance also gives up wearing dresses and even a possible sexual relationship with a male, her mother's secretary, at the same time: her choice requires her to give up at least the conventional version of femininity and its rewards, just as Le Guin's Owen earlier gave up conventional sexual activity as alien to his true masculine self. Paradoxically, however, sexuality and conventional images of sexual attractiveness are here associated with domination by a female parent: Sibilance perceives that her father represents more nurturing because he gives her more space to be herself and unconventional, to be by herself and sexless. In other words, this is a male fantasy of nurturance which is defined by the conventionally masculine virtues of separateness and noninterference,

and in which females become demonic and indeed emasculating by demanding the traditional feminine values of community and adherence to conventional communal values like sexual attractiveness. But even so, Brooks confirms what all the other books suggest: that to be truly musical is to express community-creating harmonies, not an imposition of the self over others.

In a surprising number of ways, Erika Tamar's *Blues for Silk Garcia* parallels *Midnight Hour Encores*—and replicates *A Solitary Blue*. A girl lives with one parent, whom she sees as constricting her and her music, and believes that her musical talent has been inherited from and expresses the spirit of her other parent, whom, again, she has never met and knows nothing about (how often the plots of these novels about young musicians center around their search for and coming to terms with a parent they never previously knew).¹ As the by-now familiar plot develops in *Silk Garcia*, it is no surprise that Linda discovers she was wrong—that the parent she lives with is her true nurturer, and that her other parent actually represents a poisonous set of dangerous possibilities that might well destroy her ability to make music. In the context of the other novels I've discussed, it also comes as no surprise that the nurturing parent in this case is female and the destructive one male; the author is female.

Linda knows that her dead father, Silk Garcia, was a great guitarist, and that she too has talent for the instrument (indeed, she chose it with the knowledge that it was her father's instrument). Resentful of her mother's refusal to talk about her father, Linda embarks on a project of discovery. At first she hears of his great genius, and resents her mother for keeping them apart even more; but finally she discovers that Silk was a sociopathic liar and drug addict, who once tried to sell her as a baby to some tourists for a few hundred dollars. He is amazingly similar to Jeff's mother in *A Solitary Blue*.

Meanwhile, however, Linda has herself indulged in some egoistic behavior that has lost her friends, and so she comes to view herself as indeed her father's daughter with a sense of doom; she always believed she was his creature, but now she comes to hate it and feel constricted by it. At the end, she realizes with relief that entering the space of her music does not represent captivity by her father's failings. Furthermore, her efforts to learn more about the past have finally allowed her mother to open up to her and accept her talent. The male space, represented by her father's "missing" a sense of participation in the human community, is replaced by the cozier female one she shares with her mother, which now allows for both music and humanity—the same conclusion Voigt reaches in *A Solitary Blue*, this time with an even clearer message about

separating music from anarchy. Linda announces at the end that she is now involved in a relationship with another male, a guitarist like her father but, she informs us, Irish like her mother's family—a safer combination of paternal talent and maternal communion. Yet once more, musical talent is defined as opposite to egotistic machismo on the one hand and safe conventionality on the other—as paradoxically self-expressive but not egocentric, communal but not stultifyingly constricting. The prevalence of this message suggests the prime ideological purpose of all these novels is to foster the development of individual creativity only by working to divest it of its potentially antisocial danger.

As in *Midnight Hour Encores*, the major action in *Blues for Silk Garcia* is replicated in other movements of the plot in intriguingly suggestive ways. At school, Linda is an outsider; her only friend is an eccentric boy interested in parakeet breeding. When she becomes the focus of attention of a popular and very attractive boy, and then his sexual partner, she imagines herself to be replicating the story of her mother with her father; her mother was a small town girl like herself, an outsider who felt constricted by her life, who was excited by the sexual energy emanating from Silk Garcia, and who was privileged to become his partner—until, as Linda sees it, her mother lost her courage. But the irony is that the boy, Michael, is in fact more like Linda's mother than her father—popular in high school, the center of attention there, but devoid of real talent or intelligence, and getting by on looks and charm—a representation of conventional social success at odds with eccentricity or genius. Linda comes to see that in her relationship to Michael, she is not as her mother was to Silk, but instead, as Silk was to her mother. For the sake of her musical career, Linda deserts Michael during the middle of an audition for an important producer, a friend of his father, that he has arranged for the two of them. Like Silk, then, Linda comes to see herself as a dangerous force that sweeps others up, uses them, hurts them, and then moves on. Associated with Silk, this sort of behavior is clearly identified as masculine and antifamilial, antihumane; Linda must recognize it in herself, and then reject it, before she can become a truly productive musician and human being.

Intended for younger audiences, Patricia MacLachlan's *Facts and Fictions of Minna Pratt* is a less intense version of just about the same story: a young female musician believes her mother to be at odds with her music, wishes for a freedom to create that she identifies with a space occupied by a male, and finally learns to accept and appreciate the love of her mother. Minna feels constricted by the messy, chaotic atmosphere of her home, and longs for the freedom she believes exists in her friend Lucas's

home—his parents live a quiet and orderly life, and give him the space to do as he wishes. Since both Lucas and Minna live throughout the story with both their parents, this book doesn't resonate so obviously with connections between music and gender; nevertheless, Minna focuses her annoyance with her family life specifically around her feelings about her mother. She comes to a proper realization of her situation when she realizes she thinks “just like her mother”—that she wants chaos and communion, not isolation.

One of the most interesting aspects of *Minna Pratt* is the way in which it replicates the movement of *Silk Garcia* from the wish for isolation, and the identification of music with antifamilial values, toward an acceptance of community and the perception of music as an image of social harmony. Not only does Minna see Lucas's isolated space as an open environment for the production of music, but she and the other members of her quartet can only play well in rehearsal if their chairs are pointed away from each other: their musical harmony requires lack of actual communion. At the end, however, the quartet does manage to play in harmony as they watch each other; and their music forms a community out of an audience that includes all the other previously isolated characters of the book, now brought into one space.

In other words, this novel tells a story opposite to the conventional *bildungsroman*, which moves a young person from community to separate isolation. That might not be surprising in a book for younger readers that so clearly works, as many books for younger readers do, to confirm the rightness of a writer/mother's values over the supposedly wrongheaded wish for independence of young children. MacLachlan repeats the same trick here that has been played in many other children's novels: by identifying a parent's constricting lifestyle as unconventional, and by associating a child's wish for independence from it with a repressively conventional lifestyle, she manages to celebrate a child's acceptance of lack of independence from parents as an act of independent self-expression.

But it is surprising that the same pattern—and the same sleight of hand—occurs so often in novels for older readers like *Midnight Hour Encores*, *Blues for Silk Garcia*, or *A Solitary Blue*. All these books allow an apparent expression of individuality at the end only by rejecting any of the usual conditions of the individual—separation, isolation, egocentricity—and by replacing them with the usual conditions of community—connection with and concern for others, acceptance of and by others. All the novelists I have discussed here use music as a metaphor for a peculiarly selfless form of self-expression connected with a womblike maternal space.

The only novel I found in which that doesn't happen is Jean Richardson's *Musical Chairs*.

In this novel, as in all the others, music represents a space of freedom, one which is almost always at odds with parental values and family circumstances. The four main characters, young performers involved in a music competition, all have problems with their families, and must come to terms with them before learning how to deal with their musical talent. Most obviously, Tod and Jane both come from less affluent families with no history of music or culture, and must fight to establish their need to perform in the face of parental incomprehension. In counterpoint to this, Vicky believes she must fight her musical family's incorrect assumption that she wishes a career in music—she associates music *with* family, and wishes to escape both; while on the other hand, Philip believes he wants success as a cellist in order to compensate for his father's failure as a musician. While the problems of these young people are different from and even opposite to each other, all involve separating their music from their families, finding in it a space freed from familial constriction.

Furthermore, the question of music is tied up with questions of gender. Jane must compete for her teacher's attention with a boy who turns out to have little talent but a rich and domineering mother; this boy is caught up in a female space, held captive there by music—and Jane counterpoints his experience by finally escaping the constricting space of her teacher's limited musical abilities. Vicky tries to escape her parents' sense of who she is through her attraction to an unmusical boy, but becomes confused when her attempt to rebuff his sexual advances results in the mouthpiece of her clarinet being crushed; and in counterpoint to that, Tod's violin is crushed when he tries to prove his manhood to his musical brother through the conventional route of earning large sums of money, which he plans to do by playing in the subway until some drunken louts destroy his instrument. The apparent implication in both cases is that music will be crushed when sexuality and machismo become operative. Finally, Philip loses a girlfriend as he becomes absorbed in the music he has begun to compose, and must wonder if such absorption might not be dangerously antisocial. While all do it in different ways, then, these characters all test out the possibility that music either represents or opposes their expression of gender and sexuality.

What is surprising here is that they eventually discover that it doesn't—that finally, music is an activity totally separate from all the usual forms of social and sexual communion, familial or sexual, and that while it separates them from others, that is a source of strength rather than danger. We last see Philip alone in his room, happily caught up in composing

and in no need of contact with others. As Tod plays in the competition final, he decided to think of no one as he plays, neither his mother nor his girlfriend: “No, the most important thing in his life was his violin” (125). Jane’s last statement is an acknowledgment that, “in choosing the first step towards becoming a better pianist, she saw that she would also be taking the first step away from” her parents (122)—and she accepts it as inevitable and right. Even Vicky, having admitted to her father that she doesn’t want to be a musician, discovers that perhaps she does, and that her music is quite separate from and has nothing to do with her feelings about either her parents or her boyfriend, whom she remains involved with even after the mouthpiece episode and who even encourages her to play. Unable to imagine any longer that music represents parental oppression or that her feelings for the boy represent an alternative to music, she finds herself at the competition final alone on stage, separate from both her mother and her boyfriend in the audience, alone in the music and feeling “an unexpected rush of happiness” (123) in her absorption into it. All four conclude by seeing music as separate from and usefully separating them from both parents and their own sense of themselves as male or female.

Why does this book not identify music with some acceptably nurturing form of social communion, as all the others I’ve discussed do? Why should it alone allow its characters to find joy in the understanding that their talent might well isolate them from others, make them separate, giving them freedom in a space uninhabited by anyone else and not in any way related to or making a statement about their social status, their sexuality, or their gender? The only answer I can offer is that, unlike all the other books I’ve discussed, *Musical Chairs* happens to be written by a British author rather than an American one. It might well be that the need to temper the isolating and self-expressive aspects of music with a sense of societal concern and communion is peculiarly American, an expression of a society that distrusts theoretically undemocratic claims to genius. It might also well be that the conventional opposition between artistic creativity and acceptable masculinity is also American—*Musical Chairs* is the only one of these books that doesn’t define the space in which music is performed as either male and female, that not only leaves it unmarked by gender but in fact, presents it as something outside of and separate from sexual and other communal human concerns, simply a space apart. The possibility that this book’s differences might represent the societal assumptions of a different culture merely confirms the degree to which the connections between gender and music in all the other novels

is less a thematic statement by their various authors than an expression of, and an attempt to deal with, unconsciously held cultural assumptions.

Notes

¹ This pattern, found so often in recent novels, appears to have a fairly long history. In Gene Stratton Porter's *Girl of the Limberlost*, written in 1909, Elnora finds her true self beyond oppressive conventional definitions of subservient femininity by defying her mother's oppressive control and entering a forbidden musical space defined as belonging to her long dead father. When she secretly defies her mother and plays her father's violin, she comes into a richer and more rewarding understanding of her self; she becomes free of her mother's repression. But then, like Voigt's and Tamar's characters, the new understanding won from her connection to her dead parent allows her to transform the space she occupies with the living one: knowledge of her father's music allows her to create communion and harmony between herself and her formerly repressive mother.

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