

**Title Page: Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects**

**Proposal Information**

**Name of Project:** Trans and Queer Identities in Contemporary Western Art Music

**Submission Date:** 6 April, 2009      **Sponsoring Department:** Music

**Anticipated completion date or project due date:** 10 May, 2010

**Researcher Information (print):**

**Name:** Christopher Clara Brasseur

**Address:** 570 Grand Ave. #2

Oakland, CA 94610

**Phone:** (814)222-2398      **email:** cebrasseur@gmail.com

**Researcher's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**For student projects (print)**

**Project Advisor's Name:** Nalini Ghuman **email:** nalinig@mills.edu

**Project Advisor's**

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Description of Research

This project arises from a growing frustration I have felt while trying to find information about contemporary queer and trans musicians.<sup>1</sup> Most available resources relate to popular forms of music and the little written on art music is primarily historical. Transgender narratives exist *only* in relation to popular music and transgender art composers and musicians might as well not exist, now or in the past, for all that they are written of. This lack of a specifically transgender focus in music histories does not mean that phenomena relating to non-gender normative experiences are not explored, they are simply discussed within a framework of sexuality rather than one of gender.<sup>2</sup> Susan McClary and Ruth Solie have contributed pioneering works to the burgeoning field of musicological feminist criticism, bringing gender and sexuality into the realm of musical study for the first time.<sup>3</sup> It is from works such as theirs that new of narratives of queer and trans musical experience must originate.

Sexuality and gender as concepts are often confused or used interchangeably.<sup>4</sup> Thus it will help this account to introduce definitions of both. Sexuality is a way of describing to whom a person may be sexually and/or emotionally attracted. In this use of the word, sexuality and sexual orientation are synonymous. Gender refers to the complex system of culturally defined characteristics and behaviors, which may be used to divide people into the categories of “man”

---

<sup>1</sup> I am using the term queer to refer to any range of sexualities outside of the normative one of heterosexuality, and the term trans to refer to any range of gender expressions and identifications outside of the normative binary of male men and female women.

<sup>2</sup> For example see Brett, Wood, and Thomas, *Queering the Pitch*, 139-154, and the discussion of Billy Tipton in Brett and Wood, "Gay and lesbian music," *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online* (both examples are discussed in detail later).

<sup>3</sup> McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* and Solie, *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*.

<sup>4</sup> Early discussions of homosexuality posit it as “gender inversion” whereby the same-sex desire is an indicator of identification with the gender not associated with one’s body (Mahoney, *Human Sexuality*, 309). In more recent times the inclusion of transgender into organizations and services originally created for lesbian and gay people, adding the T to LGB so to speak, has helped to enforce the connection between gender expression and sexuality. And of course most ways of determining a person’s sexuality rely on gender cues rather than observed homosexual behavior.

and “woman” whereby men are linked to masculine characteristics and women to feminine ones. In this definition gender is distinct from sex, which is the complex system of physical characteristics used to divide people into the categories of male and female.<sup>5</sup> Trans identities are often articulated when there is a disconnect between sex and gender identity.

Confusion of sexuality and gender is no less apparent in musicology than anywhere else. The “Sex, sexuality” article in Grove Music Online differentiates “between committing a sexual act and being a homosexual, a heterosexual, or a transsexual,” but fails to differentiate between being a homo- or heterosexual and being a transsexual.<sup>6</sup> In the growing field of lesbian and gay musicology, musical expressions of non-normative gender are considered, but the framework used is primarily that of sexuality; the binary dichotomies of male vs. female and man vs. woman are primarily left intact. For example, in the essay “Unveiled Voices” Joke Dame discusses the sexual and vocal ambiguity of the castrato. Dame argues that “the castrato’s virility, the phallus, has been displaced into his voice”<sup>7</sup> thus viewing the castrato as all man, going on to write that “most listeners experienced the castrato as a *man* with a high *male* voice.”<sup>8</sup> This reading allows Dame to consider the relationship between the male sculptor Sarrasine and castrato Zambinella in Balzac’s novella *Sarrasine* in a purely homosexual light. Dame also considers modern castings of male tenors or female sopranos in parts formerly filled by castrati, specifically the sexual and vocal implications of casting the leading heterosexual couple with two men, two women, or a man and a woman. Dame discusses the homoerotic overtones or lack thereof implicit in different casting choices and the relation these choices bear to original casting.<sup>9</sup> What

---

<sup>5</sup> Intersex, “a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn’t seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male” should be added as an alternative to the categories of male and female, but is generally not recognized (Intersex Society of North America).

<sup>6</sup> Kallberg, “Sex, sexuality,” *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*.

<sup>7</sup> Brett, Wood, and Thomas, *Queering the Pitch*, 144.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 148-150.

Dame does not discuss, is the possible interpretation of a female-bodied man or a male-bodied woman, and the implication of such an interpretation to the perception of the opera. While discussion of homoerotic desire portrayed in operas by means of same-sex casting and the role of the castrato is important and fascinating, I believe that such an account would be improved through a more complex treatment of gender presentation and discussion of the relation between the sex of the singer and the gender portrayed on stage.

The idea of a transgender (or transsexual) identity, like that of a homosexual one (and arguably that of heterosexual as well) is a relatively new concept that cannot necessarily be applied historically. However, limiting discourse surrounding gender variant practices to their role in sexual deviancy does a disservice to transgender history and to the full understanding of the subject under study. For example, Billy Tipton, a jazz pianist who lived for most of his life as a man, and was found to be female-bodied after his death,<sup>10</sup> is often claimed to have spent years in “undetected drag” simply to escape oppression either as a woman in a male-dominated music scene (and world) or as a lesbian in a heterosexist culture.<sup>11</sup> While this simplified reading of Tipton’s gender expression allows his life to be claimed as part of a lesbian musical narrative, it fails to address the complexities of the situation and disregards the fact that he lived and passed as a man for most of his adult life. Many people have been the victim of sexist and homophobic prejudice throughout history, yet consistently passing as a gender one does not identify with has never become a common solution. The lesbian interpretation also denies the history of transgender identity and, when expressed by musicologists, reinscribes the invisibility of trans people in the world of art music analysis.

---

<sup>10</sup> Due to a bleeding ulcer for which he refused to go to the hospital, probably fearing discovery, Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul*, 83.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-84. See also Brett and Wood, "Gay and lesbian music," *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online.*

While the uncovering of a trans history of music is an important step in deconstructing the pervasive linear history of white, straight, cisgendered<sup>12</sup> men as the sole producers of western art music in the past, it is also important to recognize the continuing contributions of queer and trans musicians. I contend that just as it is important for young children to have positive reflections of themselves in the adults they interact with, so too is it important for young musicians to see themselves reflected in the older musical generation. Thus, I feel that it is very important to preserve accounts of the experiences of trans and queer musicians, both to break the silence surrounding their existence (particularly in the case of trans musicians) and to provide a location for younger musicians to see their identities reflected back at themselves.

The goal of this project is to address the absence of literature addressing contemporary trans and queer narratives in art music without negating the history from which such narratives arise. I will use personal interviews with composers and musicians who identify as queer and/or trans to chronicle and discuss different aspects of what it means to be a queer and/or trans musician and how individuals describe and mediate their identities. Through interviews I hope to be able to uncover both the breadth of queer and trans experiences, and the commonalities among them. I hope to hear about the frustration as well as the successes and imagine that I will hear many diverse visions of what it means to be queer and/or trans, and an art musician. I hope that by recording their experiences I will set a precedent of acknowledging and preserving the experiences of queer and/or trans musicians.

---

<sup>12</sup> Cisgendered, or cissexual refers to people “who have only ever experienced their subconscious and physical sexes as being aligned.” Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 12.

## Selected Bibliography

- Brett, Philip and Elizabeth Wood. "Gay and lesbian music." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. 2 Mar. 2009  
 <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/42824>>.
- Brett, Philip, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary Thomas eds. *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Feinberg, Leslie. *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.
- Intersex Society of North America. "What is Intersex?" *Frequently Asked Questions*. Intersex Society of North America, 1993-2008 Web. 12 March, 2009.
- Kallberg, Jeffrey. "Gender (i)." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. 2 Mar. 2009  
 <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/41235>>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Sex, sexuality." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. 2 Mar. 2009  
 <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/41236>>.
- Mahoney, E. R. *Human Sexuality*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983.
- McClary, Susan. *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
- Peraino, Judith Ann. *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.
- Serano, Julia. *Whipping Girl*. Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2007.
- Solie, Ruth A. ed. "Feminism." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. 2 Mar. 2009  
 <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/41237>>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Stryker, Susan. *Transgender History*. Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008.

### Benefits of Research to Human Subjects

This study is designed to shed light on a subject area that is severely underrepresented in current musicological study, namely the music of queer and trans identified people. This research looks specifically at the world of contemporary western art music, making it unique in that most queer musicology is focused more historically, and contemporary accounts tend to consider only popular musics. To my knowledge, there has been no attempt to talk with a large body of queer and trans identified musicians and to record their experiences. The goal of this project is to record and analyze these experiences, creating an accessible record for the next generation of queer and trans musicians, and a starting point for understanding the current queer and trans musical communities.

### Description of the Participants

The participants in this study will be musicians (students or professional) in the western art music tradition, who identify as trans and/or queer. The term queer, in this context, refers to any range of sexualities outside of the normative one of heterosexuality, and the term trans refers to any range of gender expressions and identifications outside of the normative binary of male men and female women.

### Procedures and Methods

I will contact potential participants via email listservs, college and university music and queer studies departments (and equivalents), campus LGBTQ resource centers (and equivalents), on my website ([www.professionalpenguin.com/music](http://www.professionalpenguin.com/music)), and through word of mouth, using the snowball approach. The statement to be sent out on listservs, to colleges, and posted on my

website is reproduced in the appendix as well as specific listserv, department, and resource center information for which I have personal contacts.

Data will be collected through personal and telephone interviews and in some cases a paper survey. The questions that form the basis of the interviews (and the entirety of the paper surveys) are reproduced in the appendix. All of the personal and telephone interviews will be digitally recorded.

#### Potential Risks and Discomforts to Subjects

The topics under discussion can be very personal and may be uncomfortable for some participants. The greatest risk however, in a study like this one, is that of “outing” participants who are not generally known to be queer and/or trans.

#### Means Taken to Minimize Risk and Discomfort

Participants will be given the option to remain anonymous. For those who choose to take advantage of this option, potentially identifying information will be concealed. Audio data will be stored on my computer, which only I have access to. Transcripts of some parts of interviews may appear as in my thesis, however, for individuals seeking anonymity, they will be stripped of identifying information.

Appendix**“Trans and Queer Identities in Contemporary Western Art Music”**

This project will partially fulfill requirements for the Master of Arts in music composition at Mills College in Oakland, CA. I am exploring the often invisible spaces of queer and trans identities in contemporary western art music through interviews with contemporary composers and musicians who identify as queer and/or trans.

I am using the term queer to refer to any range of sexualities outside of the normative one of heterosexuality, and the term trans to refer to any range of gender expressions and identifications outside of the normative binary of male men and female women.

I am choosing to discuss both sexuality (queer) and gender identity (trans) because I see silence on both of these subjects within discussions of contemporary classical music, and because both queer and trans identities operate and interlock in my own life. I do not mean to equate gender and sexuality or to imply that trans people are necessarily queer, or vice versa.

**Informed consent**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, state that I am over 18 years of age and that I have read the above statement and voluntarily agree to participate in a research project conducted by Christopher Clara Brasseur, graduate student, Mills College.

I know that I may withdraw from participation at any time without prejudice or penalty.

I understand that any use of the digital recording that results from this interview will not be used for purposes that are not directly related to research venues, such as presentation in meetings or conferences open to the public or press, without my further written consent. I understand that individuals associated with this research may request now or at some time in the future an extension of the permissions for the use of this information that I consent to here.

I understand that I may contact Christopher Clara Brasseur, (814)222-2398 (cebrasseur@gmail.com), or Professor Nalini Ghuman, Mills College music department, (510)430-2332 (nalinig@mills.edu) if I have questions about this study at a time following my participation.

\_\_\_ I would like to remain anonymous.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(signature of participant)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(signature of researcher)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(date)

Statement advertising for participants

**Seeking queer and/or trans musicians and composers**

I am a Masters of Music Composition student at Mills College in Oakland, CA and I am looking to interview musicians and composers who identify as queer and/or trans for my masters thesis. I am using the term queer to refer to any range of sexualities outside of the normative of heterosexuality, and trans to refer to any range of gender expressions and identifications outside of the normative binary of male men and female women. I am specifically interested in musicians and composers in the western art music tradition.

This project arises from a growing frustration I have felt while trying to find information about contemporary queer and trans musicians. Most information of this sort relates to popular forms of music and the little written on art music is primarily historical. I believe that recognizing the continuing contributions of queer and trans musicians in the present is an important part of uncovering a history of queer and trans music, and the goal of this project is begin to create a record of and discussion about what it means to be queer/trans and an art musician.

I am choosing to discuss both sexuality (queer) and gender identity (trans) because I see silence on both of these subjects within discussions of contemporary classical music, and because both queer and trans identities operate and interlock in my own life. I do not mean to equate gender and sexuality or to imply that trans people are necessarily queer, or vice versa.

I look forward to talking to you and hearing about your experiences being queer and/or trans in the world of art music.

Christopher Clara Brasseur

cebrasseur@gmail.com  
(814)222-2398

Specific listserv, department, and resource center information**Listserves**

Of which I am a member:

- International Alliance for Women in Music – IAWMLIST@unt.edu
- Society of Composers, Inc. – scimembers@societyofcomposers.org
- Mills graduate music students – music-grads@mills.edu

Of which I am not a member:

- American Musicological Society, LGBTQ study group – ams-lgbtq@hotmail.com
- Queer Studies Listserv – qstudy-1@mailman.rice.edu
- Society for Music Theory: Queer Resource Group – Fred E. Maus (contact person), fmaus@virginia.edu

**Music Department Contacts**

Oberlin College

- Professor Lewis Nielson (composition) – lewis.nielson@oberlin.edu
- Professor Arnie Cox (music theory) – arnie.cox@oberlin.edu

Penn State University

- Professor Paul Barsom (composition) – prb4@psu.edu
- Peter Buckland (graduate student) – pdb118@psu.edu

UC Berkeley

- Professor Cindy Cox (music) – cacox@berkeley.edu

UC San Diego

- Ryan Welsh (graduate student) – rwelsh@ucsd.edu

**LGBT Resource Center Contacts**

Multicultural Resource Center (Oberlin College)

- Jack Skelton (LGBTQ Community Coordinator) – jack.skeleton@oberlin.edu

LGBTQA Student Resource Center (Penn State University)

- Allison Subasic (Director) – afs11@psu.edu

LGBT Campus Center (University of Wisconsin – Madison)

- Eric Trekell (Director) – ewtrekell@wisc.edu

Interview Questionnaire

How do you view/describe your personal identity?

Your musical identity?

Describe your relationship to queer/trans communities.

Musical communities?

How “out” are you?

Does your experiences as part of queer/trans communities influence how you compose/perform?

How?

Who are your musical influences/role models?

Queer/trans influences/role models?

Do these lists overlap?

How do you feel about that?

Do you feel that people react to your music differently if/because of your identity as queer/trans (or that they would if they knew)?

How do you feel about that?

Is there anything else you would like to say about your experiences as a queer/trans identified musician/composer?

Is there anyone else you think I should contact?