

Postmillennial gendered discourses in South African musicology

Walton, Chris & Muller, Stephanus, eds. 2005. **Gender and sexuality in South African music**. Stellenbosch: Sun Media. 97 p. Price: R150,00. ISBN: 978-1919980409.

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Gendered discourses in musicology constitute a highly current hence topical research issue. This publication, while it breathes a breath of fresh air into the (oftentimes) conservative world of musicology, should not be seen as the final word on this issue. I have no doubt that many more discourses will follow either as a result of this one and/or discussions with other points of departure. I am in full agreement with the editors when they state in the introduction that over “the past two decades, the study of sexuality and gender in music has become a decidedly mainstream activity”.

The contributors are (in order of their chapter contributions) Grant Olwage, Shirli Gilbert, Brett Pyper, Nishlyn Ramanna, Stephanus Muller, Martina Viljoen & Nicol Viljoen, Chris Walton, Meki Nzewi & Sello Galane and Jeanne Zaidel-Rudolph. Of the eleven contributors, nine are based in South Africa. I have had the privilege of interacting with most of them either at conferences or at other academic gatherings. With the exception of Stephanus Muller, all the other “locals” are based outside of the Western Cape Province. The overseas-based contributors are Shirli Gilbert (University of Michigan) and Chris Walton (Soloturn, Switzerland).

While the three-pronged theme, namely gender, sexuality and South African music, is endemic to all the chapters, the individual chapters in themselves engage in very disparate discourses, all in keeping, I surmise, with the various areas of expertise of the individual contributors. The musical genres include black choralism (Grant Olwage), popular song (Shirli Gilbert) and jazz (Brett Pyper and Nishlyn Ramanna). Chapters on female composers include “Being Rosa” (on composer Rosa Nepgen) by Chris Walton and “Pride, prejudice and power: on being a woman composer in South Africa” by Jeanne Zaidel-Rudolph. Meki Nzewi and Sello Galane offer a

philosophical discourse entitled “Music is a woman”. Stephanus Muller speaks to the issue of being a gay Afrikaner composer in his chapter “Queer alliances”.

For researchers into the history of black choralism, the first chapter by Grant Olwage, entitled “Black musicality in colonial South Africa: a discourse of alteralities”, is compulsory reading. The main thrust of Shirley Gilbert’s chapter, entitled “Gender and sexuality in South African music” is an investigation of how the songs of the struggle era can serve to deepen one’s understanding of the role of women in the struggle against apartheid. She raises several questions at the end of the chapter for further debate. Brett Pyper in his chapter “To hell with home and shame!: jazz, gender and sexuality in the drum journalism of Todd Matshikiza, 1951-1957” surveys the contributions of Todd Matshikiza both as a writer of jazz articles for *Drum* (1951-1957) as well as a “sought-after music teacher” and “gifted jazz musician” (p. 20). Nishlyn Ramanna’s chapter “Ethnicity, sexuality and all that jazz: the musical text as confessional space” provides a window of understanding into this gifted jazz-pianist-composer’s creativity. Stephanus Muller’s “Queer alliances” is a thought-provoking chapter which interrogates the plight of the gay white male university-based composer during the apartheid era. To quote a salient sentence: “... many of the composers (and performers and teachers) supported and fostered by the institutional structures of apartheid South Africa with its stultifying and often hypocritical moralistic code, were gay men.” (p. 38). In the chapter “The politics of the ineffable: a deconstructive reading of Hubert Du Plessis’ *De Bruid*” the primary focus is on Derrida’s deconstructive practice and how this technique can “give ‘voice’ to the excluded others in this song [*De Bruid*]” (p. 51) by Hubert de Plessis, which is the central part of his song cycle, *Die Vrou*. Chris Walton, in his chapter “Being Rosa”, assesses the contribution of the composer Rosa Nepgen to the South African serious music landscape. Nzewi and Galane in “Music is a woman” discuss, in particular, the role of gender in the *kiba* musical arts of the Pedi. Jeanne Zaidel – Rudolph’s chapter “Pride, prejudice and power: on being a woman composer in South Africa” – like Nishlyn Ramanna’s, is also autobiographical, giving the reader a fascinating glimpse into her world as a South African female composer.

This book, the first of its kind in South Africa, does indeed reveal how gender and sexuality both play an important role in musical creativity. Accordingly, it should be of particular value to both the student and teacher/lecturer of musicology. There is a balance

between chapters with a historical focus and those with a current focus. More publications should come to the fore wherein individual composers of any musical tradition in South Africa write about the wellsprings of their creativity via a gendered discourse.