Music into action: performing gender on the Viennese concert stage, 1790–1810

Tia DeNora*

School of Historical, Political, and Sociological Studies, University of Exeter,
Amory Building, Rennes Drive, Exeter EX4 4RJ, UK

Abstract

Studies of music tend to emphasize either “what” music means or “how” music is produced. They often leave in shadow music as it comes to serve as a formative medium of social life. By contrast, I propose that we consider music in terms of what it may “afford” users, by which I mean how music may provide resources for structuration. I develop this argument with a case study of music and gender formation in the 19th century, focusing in particular on work in progress that deals with the performance of Beethoven’s piano music and its association with masculine musical aesthetics circa 1800–1810. © 2002 Published by Elsevier Science B.V.

1. Music into action

A performed art, music happens. But the paradigms devoted to music research often overlook music’s eventful character. While there are studies of musical texts as representations (“new” musicology, cultural studies) and studies of musical contexts as conditions of music production (sociology), there is still scarce work devoted to music as it is performed, appropriated, and so comes to serve (in ways that can be documented and specified spatially/temporally) as a constitutive medium of social life. It is this process that I describe by the phrase, “music into action.”

In what follows, I focus on music acts and illustrate this focus with data drawn from an on-going case study concerned with the musical constitution of gender differences during the 19th century. I do this in two parts. First, I consider music as a constitutive medium in social life, and I pose the question of how—in its unfolding as a technological, embodied, and performed event—music can be understood as a medium through which social relations are forged. I suggest that music is not
“about” the social but rather it exemplifies and indeed is social life—a mode of doing—in its own right; a mode that may enter into and so structure social experience. I develop this argument by presenting the concept of musical “affordance” and by considering music as a gestural medium by which I mean that music (including, crucially, music as it is performed) provides a venue for demonstrating—through non-propositional and often embodied means—categories, capacities, and social distributions of action/experience.

Second, I situate this theoretical concern within a case study. I consider piano performance (in Vienna c1780–1810) as a site where gender differences (which were later linked to ideas about the “nature” of the difference between men and women) were first enacted for public consumption. The empirical details of this case study have been published elsewhere in preliminary form and further research is on-going (see DeNora, 2000, 2001, 2002). Here, my aim is only to allude to those details so as to exemplify an investigative strategy devoted to music as event and so elaborate concepts for theorising music’s formative role in the construction of social life, its role as an “active ingredient” in social life.

The motivation for this case study is as follows: although the concern with music and gender formation is now a major preoccupation within both the social sciences and the “new” musicology, this concern is not usually brought to bear upon the actual practices of music production, and thus, upon a conception of music as a performative event (for a notable exception, see Green, 1997). Without this focus, I suggest, it is simply not possible to illuminate the mechanisms through which music comes to constitute social relations. New methodologies and new concepts, ones that exceed both musicology and sociology, are required if we are to understand how music actually works as an active ingredient, a structuring medium of social life.

2. Music as event

2.1. What can music afford?

Reception studies have shown that the meanings of cultural media (including their perceived “value”) are constructed through the interaction between media and media consumers (for example, see Moores, 1990; van Rees, 1987; Tota, 2001). This emergent aspect of cultural-textual meaning includes both the meanings found “in” texts by amateur or lay consumers and also the meanings divined by “expert” analysts and readers. At the same time, texts (e.g., musical materials) are by no means neutral—to the extent that they are part of and thus help to determine their reception contexts—through the ways they are perceived to make intertextual reference and through their physical and conventional features such as tropes, topoi, family resemblances and, in the case of repeated hearings, accumulated connotations, institutionalised interpretations, and so forth (Middleton, 1990), though even the most conventional of materials can still be, in Eco’s terms (1992), “overinterpreted.” While no musical unit, passage, or work may be able to guarantee its reception under all circumstances, musical materials are nonetheless part of and contribute to their
circumstances of hearing (see DeNora, 2000: 21–45 for a more detailed explication of these points).

Particular musical materials may thus be perceived, often with regularity, as commensurate with a variety of “other things.” These “things” may be other works (e.g., how we come to recognise the “style” of an era, composer, or region), but more interesting for socio-musical analysis, they may be some extra-musical phenomena, such as values, ideas, images, social relations, or styles of activity. And it is here that music comes to be understood as—within the lexicon of the various “post” theories of the 1990s—“analogous” to, a “simulacrum” or “representation” of, “homologous” with, or otherwise connected to social life, expression, action, and identity.

The sociological significance of this last point is intensified when music’s social “content” is not merely hailed (as a representation of a reality or imagined reality) but is rather acted upon—when music comes to serve in some way as an organising material for action, motivation, thought, imagination, and so forth. It is here that we can begin to speak of music as it “gets into” action. And it is here that socio-musical study can be extended beyond notions (derived from textual analysis) of music’s symbolic character, its interpretations and perceived meaning(s). There are precedents here in the work of scholars—prominent in the American context here is Robert Wuthnow—who have been concerned with the interrelationships between (rather than meanings of) cultural elements, an emphasis that seeks to retain the sociological impetus within cultural studies. As Wuthnow (1987) has observed, meanings emerge from cultural systems and fields that provide categories by which we formally think about ourselves; a perspective that would, at least implicitly, call for a focus upon actors as they engage with and mobilize cultural materials, as they move through particular cultural fields and so configure themselves as conscious agents. Such a perspective is in line, I believe, with the focus within organizational studies on structuration and agency—work such as DiMaggio’s (1982) abiding focus on agents as they mobilise cultural structures to produce and reproduce organizations. Here then, music can be understood as a resource for getting things done, and in this sense, the sociology of music can not only learn from existing theoretical and empirical work on institutions; it can also advance that work through its potential to reveal the aesthetic and non-cognitive dimensions of social agency.

The focus on music “in action” is a focus on music-as-practice and music as providing a basis for practice. It deals with music as a formative medium in relation to consciousness and action, as a resource for—rather than medium about—world building. Within this dynamic conception of music’s social character, focus shifts from what music depicts or what it can be “read” as saying “about” society to what it makes possible, to what it “affords.”

Adapted from social psychology, the concept of “affordance” captures music’s role as, to use Antoine Hennion’s (2002) term, a “mediator” of the social. And depending upon how it is conceptualised, the concept of “affordance” highlights music’s potential as an organising medium, as something that helps to structure such things as styles of consciousness, ideas, or modes of embodiment. To speak of music as affording things is to suggest that it is a material against which things are shaped
up, elaborated through practical and sometimes non-conscious action. Some examples will help to clarify this point.

2.1.1. Example 1, embodied action

Different types of rhythm may afford particular types of bodily movement. Indeed, this is the point of many “work songs,” both traditional and, via time-and-motion study, modern (Lanza, 1994). Rhythm may be said to “afford” movement to the extent that it is perceived as profiling specific types of movement (e.g., tempos, energy levels, styles of movement) and to the extent that actors entrain their bodily movements to its properties. While dance may be the most obvious example of how bodies come to be entrained to rhythms, dance is simply one of the more formalised activities where this entrainment occurs. Music may be linked to a retinue of more subtle bodily features that characterise movement and comportment in daily life—posture, pace, and movement style. These things, in turn, may be associated with forms (and images) of social agency as types of being and, when certain individual attributes are associated with those forms, with hierarchies of individuals in relation to those forms. Music may also afford the imaginative projection of bodily movement, as when one “pictures” a type of movement when hearing a type of music. The example of marching music serves to illustrate these points (McNeill, 1995). On hearing march music one may (but not automatically—see below) be reminded of or begin to imagine—to “picture”—marching. In other words, one may become motivated or aroused in relation to a type of agency—marching—to a particular movement style, which is associated with a particular set of institutional practices and their particular agentic states, such as bodily regulation, coordination, and entrainment. One may “become” (produce one’s self as) a “marcher.” That is, on the occasion of music heard, one may adapt one’s self to its perceived properties and so become, via the music, a type of agent; in this case, one imbued with march-like, militaristic agency.

2.1.2. Example 2, recognition and cognition

There is a style of singing in Mongolia that consists of a kind of choral droning in which each voice produces more than one note (by allowing the voice to draw out harmonics or “overtones” within a note). This droning produces “extra” notes; that is, notes that are not being sung by any individual singer. One could imagine how this type of music “affords,” or provides, a model for thinking about the concept of community (e.g., “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts”). (Compare this to the example of marching music and the bodies who march to it. There, each individual enacts or incorporates into his/her action an external source of entrainment—the pulse or beat which is externally provided rather than emerging out of what is produced by “all” in concert.)

2.1.3. Consideration of the examples

Here, we see how music can come to serve as a resource for creating the “metaphors we live by”—in this case, by providing a resource for cognitively mapping/elaborating a concept onto music’s perceived features. Things found “in” music
(even highly abstract aspects of music’s texture or structure) thus come to serve as resources for elaborating knowledge and its categories and, in this case, music may be understood to provide patterns against which that knowledge is shaped up. Thus, even at its most abstract (e.g., textless music, experimental or unconventional music), music can provide resources for thinking—resources in the form of object lessons, analogies, exemplars, and models. Indeed, Adorno’s (1973) use of Schoenberg as a paradigm of progressive thought habits did precisely this—it mapped onto music a model of cognitive style. [Note too how Adorno believed that Stravinsky’s capitulation to rhythm and pulse served to collapse subject into object, to “force” the subject into total identification with an external and arbitrary (musical) power.]

In both these examples, music “causes” nothing; it “makes nothing happen,” as Auden said of poetry, and it certainly does not “give rise” either to marching or ideas of community. That is, to speak of music as an affordance structure is by no means the same as to speak of music as “cause” or “stimulus” of action, thought, or emotional response. By contrast, the concept of affordance extends developments within reception theory, emphasising music’s effects as dependant upon its recipients’ appropriational acts and responses. It posits music as something acted with and acted upon. It is only through this appropriation that music comes to “afford” things. In other words, music’s affordances, while they might be anticipated, cannot be pre-determined but rather depend upon how music’s “users” connect music to other things—how they interact with and, in turn, act upon music as they have activated it.

So far, I have offered two hypothetical examples of how music is more than simply meaning, more than interpretation. I have tried to show that music is, by contrast, drawn into action through how it is appropriated, described, and acted upon. It is in and through this process of drawing music in, or drawing it together with other things, that music can be understood to afford things.

By this I mean that to interpret music—to make links between it and other things—is to “do things with music” just as one may (as described by speech-act theory) do things with words. Thus, just as one may come to use the concept of speech act to capture the constitutive power of language in use, we may also wish to speak of music-acts so as to capture the ways in which things are accomplished through musical events and their appropriations through words and deeds. And as with speech acts, music-acts function according to how, retrospectively, they are acted upon. In other words, there is no point in drawing up a taxonomy of music-acts in advance and in the abstract [see Streeck’s (1981) critique of Searle on this point, which is also discussed in DeNora (1986)].

But if I have addressed the matter of how music can be conceived of as “getting into” action, I have not yet addressed the matter of what it is about music that serves as the basis of its capacity to afford “things.” What is it about music that lends itself to serving as a resource for the constitution of other “things?” In the next section, I suggest that the answer to this question lies in music’s material and conventional properties and the ways that these properties—its patterns of movement such as rhythm, its architectural properties (at least in Western societies, where notes may be perceived as related in
"spatial" terms such as "close," "clashing," "crowded," or "harmonising")—come to possess (are recognised as possessing) gestural qualities. By "gesture," I mean that music's recipients often respond to music as if it presents a part of some "thing" that stands outside it and that points to or serves to remind recipients of that thing.

2.2. Music as gesture

For example, march music may afford a "marching" mode of embodiment because it incorporates into itself some features of marching (the clear 4/4 rhythm and defined pulse) and because these features are reinforced when marching music is played by marching and military bands—where on parade, the music can literally and figuratively be perceived as "marking time." So too, overtone singing can be perceived as creating, in and through its practice, something that is greater than the sum of its parts; something that "arises" from the equal contributions (in visual terms) of all participants (compare how such ensemble singing is produced and how that production looks visually as opposed to, say, the performance of a violin concerto). In both these cases, it is music's gestural character (sonic gestures and visual gestures of music as it is performed—I will return to this visual aspect below) that serves as the source of its affordance. Music "contains" (or is perceived as containing) a portion of an act or conceptualisation to which it is seen to refer. Music's gestural capacity was commonly remarked upon and exploited during the baroque. For example, J.S. Bach employed a variety of allegorical and gestural devices in his attempt to convey music's affect, including the "criss-crossed" tri-tones in the Crucifixus of the B Minor Mass and the "broken" rhythms in the cantata about the breaking of the bread to feed the poor.

To speak of music as gestural and as affording, via gesture, things extra-musical is by no means the same as suggesting that music's gestures can be neatly classified, but rather that regularities and conventions of use may emerge in musical practice over time and may come to be appropriated in conventional ways. Indeed, the concept of taste, as well as the statistical regularities of music consumption for particular genres and styles, derives from precisely this fact (Bryson, 1996; Peterson and Simkus, 1992). For example, in the case of marching music described above, the body is not only musically entrained but entrained in a "regular" mode of comportment where individual activity takes shape in an institutionally "routine" or "re-cognisable" manner—marching. But there is no point in engaging in an analytical strategy of specifying music's gestural properties in homological relation to other things; as the second example points out, music may be used to afford any number of new things depending upon users' motivations. Such an analytical strategy, I suggest, has no empirical value but is rather an exercise in "expert" appropriation of music. Such a strategy is just another case of music as it is being interacted with and appropriated so as to afford particular meanings/uses, for to clarify music in this way is reflexively to activate it in relation to "other things!" Indeed, the homology notion is static; it is employed to capture the idea of structural similarity—of parallels between two pre-existing things (e.g., styles of political action and styles of music).
By contrast, the notion of musical affordance is dynamic; it points to a conception of music as resource for doing, thinking, and feeling “other things”—a resource made possible by music’s capacity to be heard/perceived as gesturing to those things. Music comes to afford things when it is perceived as incorporating into itself and/or its performance some property of the extra-musical so as to be perceived as “doing” the thing to which it points and when these perceptions are acted upon. Thus, music is much more than a structural “reflection” of the social. Music is constitutive of the social insofar as it may be seen to enter action and/or conception—when “things” take shape in relation to music, when actors move in ways that are oriented to music’s rhythms (e.g., making the body move “like” marching rhythm), or when actors employ musical structures as models or analogies for elaborating conceptual awareness. And, by contrast, action may be said to “get into” music when music takes shape in relation to things outside itself, as when music incorporates aspects of the physical, conceptual, or imaginative world. In both cases, music can be understood to gesture to things outside itself (as specified by music producers and consumers) and, through its capacity as a gestural medium, to describe or provide parameters for the shaping—the “getting into”—of extra-musical “things.”

Thus, the musical and the social are not distinct, and music is no more autonomous from “society” than “society” from music. Indeed, the “and” in “music and society” simply signals a construct that is only analytical but which is inappropriate in a naturalistic sense. Rather, “music” and “other than music” are co-productive and inter-penetrative; they provide resources for mutual shaping.

From this idea, there follows an important task for socio-music analysis: namely, observing actors as they engage in the acts of drawing music into extra-musical realms and vice versa (and not always with deliberation); this task, then, addresses how music is employed for world building and how aspects of non-musical realms and materials are employed for building and responding to music. New methodologies are required for this task; ones devoted to music’s production and consumption in particular spaces and over time, and ones oriented to ethnographic and historical-ethnographic examples of interaction between music, actors, and musical/extra-musical milieus (i.e., specific and grounded case studies). Case studies are useful, I suggest, not simply because they are empirically rich and as such make for good history (their usual rationale), but also because their close attention to the details of musical practice makes for good theory. That is, case studies provide a means for describing the mechanisms of culture (music) in-action—for specifying how music works. Such a focus on practice leads us further away from a focus on musical textual objects and toward a focus on the materiality of music as event—its relations, its uses, and its circumstances and technologies of production/reception. From here, it is possible to consider how music, in and through how it is performed and appropriated, “performs” social life in the sense that it is a resource for the production of social life—that it affords modes of being, thinking, and feeling.

For this, it is necessary to focus not only on music-as-sound but on music as a conglomerate of sight and sound—as an event that is performed and as an event that, at least sometimes (especially from the 19th century onward with the rise of virtuosi), is characterised by a “performing of performance.” The latter refers to the
ways in which music’s performance was itself organised in terms of gestures—gestures which at once may afford ideas about the music (e.g., its “strength” or its “delicacy”) and ideas about its performer as a type of agent, as an expresser of expression, engaged in producing, in Richard Leppert’s sense (1993), a “sight of sound.” This focus overlaps and draws upon Lucy Green’s (1997) discussion of delineated meaning in music, which refers to the meanings that arise from music as it is displayed and as it displays its performer. The gestures of musical display involved in the production of sound are not ancillary to music but part of music’s configuration as event. These gestures may also serve as framing devices and contextualisation cues for making sense of music as event (DeNora, 1986). And even when we cannot see these display gestures, we may imagine them and may “know” what certain types of sounds mean in terms of the vision of their physical production (e.g., that tutti string passages will require vigorous scraping of bow upon string). Thus, the physical configuration of musical events is itself a resource for what music may come to afford, including ideas about the types of agents who are most appropriate to produce such gestures and, conversely, how seeing particular types of agents producing certain gestures may afford ideas about those agents, their capacities, “traits,” and so forth. The production of music is characterised by physical lineaments, which are, themselves, potentially gestural. One may, for example, feel or become “excited” while hearing/watching virtuosity displayed (think of Jacqueline Dupre’s physicality when performing Elgar). This display comes to afford other things when it “gets into” how its beholders think, feel, or act subsequent to or in relation to it.

3. Beethoven and his bodies

3.1. Music and gender representation in the 19th century

I now want to use this focus on musical gesture, event, and affordance to consider a critical issue within current musicology and cultural studies—music’s link to gender formation. How does music afford gender imagery? This topic has received a good deal of attention where music has been conceptualised as a technology of gender. Most of this work has focused upon post-enlightenment music, and much has centred around Beethoven and his stylistic “masculinity.” Beethoven’s “masculine” style is, in turn, contrasted with the “feminine” musical styles of composers such as Schubert and Chopin.

For example, in an essay entitled, “On grounding Chopin,” Rose Subotnik (1987: 127 fn. 20) raises the following question, posed to her by Susan McClary: could it be that the reason Chopin’s music is often characterised as effeminate is because his “lingering sensuousness [at moments when tonal closure is normally expected]…in contrast to the masculine Beethovenian climax, evokes and affirms the quality and the rhythm conventionally associated with female sexuality?” (Note here the homological vocabulary: musical structures parallel, in this case, structures of sexual desire and sexual response.) In another example, McClary (1991: 128) has posited Beethoven as aligned with a transgressive, indeed, violent form of masculinity,
thereby suggesting (following Adrienne Rich’s poem, “The Ninth Symphony of Beethoven understood at last as a sexual message”) that, at times, Beethoven is the perpetrator of musical—and thus symbolically—sexual violence.

In both these examples, musical and social structures are described as “sharing” certain structural features—the one is seen to be gesturing to the other. Beethoven, it is implied, is linked to—represents—a particular type of masculinity (“hegemonic masculinity”) associated with the rise of the “two-sexed” world during the 18th century and beyond (Laquer, 1990), wherein men increasingly came to be conceived as active, stable, and strong while women were seen, correspondingly, as the “opposite”—passive, unstable, and constitutionally delicate. But this recognition of “similarities” between musical and extra-musical realms—between music, biology, and social institutional representations of sexual difference—does not provide a method for investigating how these things actually took shape or how music was related to that formative process. Indeed, to make observations of music’s “shared” qualities with other things is to take part in the activity of constituting music’s affordances, to activate music’s representational features in a particular way. To write “about” music is, as the ethnomusicologist Henry Kingsbury (1991) has put it, to constitute music in some way. And to locate homological relationships between music and, in this case, gender is to treat the latter—or any other social category—as if it were some type of solid block that is devoid of any internal diversity. Concepts such as “femininity” and “masculinity” may too easily in this mode merge with essentialism.

And yet, the idea that “Beethoven is masculine” does indeed have an historical basis. Prior to Beethoven (and thus existing as intellectual resources that Beethoven could draw upon), philosophers such as Kant and, before him, Rousseau, were concerned with the notion of the “sublime” in art, which they conceptualised as that capable of inciting awe. Moreover, their conception was, as has been described by Battersby (1989: 76), one that treated the sublime as a male preserve. The “Genius,” as that concept came to develop during the 19th century, was one whose work was oriented to evoking the sublime—to inciting fear and trembling in the holders of “his” work.

It is possible to follow Beethoven as he tapped into and mobilised this imagery in his work, as I argue in on-going work (DeNora, 2001, in progress), as part of an entrepreneurial strategy of career building. In other words, we can follow Beethoven’s contemporaries and his successors as they made connections between Beethoven and images of masculine power. McClary (1991: 18) herself provides one such example, when, in 1840, Robert Schumann contrasted what he termed Beethoven’s “virile power” with Schubert’s more sensitive, “feminine” charm (McClary, 1991: 18). Beethoven’s contemporaries themselves referred to his style as “manly”—and not in the earlier 18th century use of the term “manly” to mean “mature” but rather in the sense of embodying aesthetic power and the sublime. Beethoven’s music can thus be said to have afforded specific actors and groups of actors ideas about what it meant to be a man and to be a particular kind of man. And it is in this task, I suggest, by following Beethoven’s “users” as they configured not only Beethoven but also the very image of the masculine, that we can begin to understand music’s constitutive role in relation to
gender formation—not as a “reflection of” but as a resource for performances of gender imagery in and through how that music was appropriated.

It is significant that this type of masculinity was associated with music lodged at the very heart of the musical canon—that is, with the most prestigious music of the 19th century. As such, the lineaments of masculinity that could be “found” in Beethoven’s music (both in the sound of his music and in the delineated meanings that could be read in the performance of his music) also outlined a preferred mode of masculinity within 19th century culture. This issue, which is often so abstract as to be untenable, can be grounded by considering musical practice. In particular, one can examine the circumstances of Beethoven’s performance and what that performance (i.e., its gestural character) was taken to signify by its recipients. It is this issue, I believe, that provides a way to think about how, during the 19th century, Beethoven’s music afforded the constitution of the images, ideas, and institutional practices that forged a “two sexed” world.

3.2. Gendering the piano, 1796–1810

The story goes like this: circa 1796, piano performance in Vienna was not gender specific. Women performed as well as, and with the frequency of, men. At the same time, women did not perform on most other instruments (nor did most aristocrats). According to a 1796 Who’s Who in Viennese musical life (Schoenfeld, 1796; Talbot, 1997), women did not play wind instruments of any kind, nor did they play the cello. Women avoided these instruments because their playing interrupted notions about bodily decorum; notions that celebrated a quiet body not engaged in physical effort, and notions that stretched across Europe and back at least a century. “The Harpsichord, Spinet, Lute and Bass Viol are instruments most agreeable to the Ladies”, wrote John Essex in his 1722 primer, The Young Ladies’ Conduct or, Rules for Education, under Several Heads, with instructions on dress, before and after marriage and advice to young wives (quoted in Leppert, 1993: 67).

Charles Rosen (1971: 46) once speculated that the “amateur” nature of late 18th century keyboard music had much to do with the fact that, as the difference between public and private music grew, the keyboard increasingly became the province of women. While the keyboard was indeed primarily a woman’s province in private and—on par with men—in public, the “amateur” nature of domestic keyboard genres had as much to do with aristocratic body aesthetics as it did with the fact that the keyboard was a woman’s province. Indeed, the keyboard was a woman’s province because of the demands, or lack of demands, that that instrument made upon the body, and its ability to afford the demonstration of a quiet body in performance. Moreover, there were many highly competent female pianists in Beethoven’s and Mozart’s Vienna. Indeed, for a woman, to exhibit one’s self as a body engaged in musical labour was to exhibit one’s self in a potentially erotic mode. Women thus played keyboard instruments or sang because these provided opportunities for musical participation that did not interrupt propriety.

Furthermore, women and men at the piano played, circa 1796, the same works. This factor is key: there were no means by which, once seated at the keyboard, men
could be distinguished from women in terms of pianistic, or more broadly, keyboard practice (“klavier” often referred during the 1790s to harpsichord and fortepiano interchangeably).

It is with the introduction of Beethoven’s piano works that the first signs of gender segregation at the piano can be found. Not only was this segregation remarked upon by his contemporaries (“some new things in them which the ladies do not wish to play because they are incomprehensible and too difficult”) but, at a time when he was the most frequently performed composer for the piano in Vienna, the data on repertory suggests that women did not perform Beethoven’s concertos—despite performing those by other composers (see Table 1).

In short, women tended to avoid Beethoven’s music because it called for embodied practices of performance incommensurate with gendered mores of comportment. When Beethoven arrived on the Viennese musical scene, the predominant aesthetic of piano performance celebrated a quiet, unobtrusive performing body, one to which Beethoven’s music was opposed. Beethoven was hard on pianos — his contemporaries tell us as much.

Antoin Reicha, for example, described how, during a 1795 performance of a Mozart concerto, Beethoven caused strings to break, which may say more about the state of the piano in question than it does of Beethoven’s playing. Reicha was not alone in suggesting that Beethoven’s approach was more visceral than that of his contemporaries. Franz Wegeler, the physician and life-long friend of Beethoven described Beethoven’s playing in 1791 as, “rude and hard” and Thayer and Forbes (1967: vol. I: 160) has speculated that the physicality at the keyboard for which Beethoven was noted by his contemporaries may have been the result of “...all the hardness and heaviness of manipulation caused by his devotion to the organ...” (Beethoven’s “pounding” was, in other words, a result of “bad” habits ingrained from having played an instrument that, c. 1780s, required a degree of strength far greater than that required by the fortepiano).

These accounts should not be taken to suggest that Beethoven was pianistically inept; to the contrary, he was hailed for technical agility. But they underscore how Beethoven came to inscribe his own somatic habits into his music—somatic habits that broke with prevailing conventions of a gentle, delicate, and graceful pianistic performing style and the conventional evaluative discourse used to describe that style which can be found in texts about music in the 1790s. According to Carl Czerny, a Beethoven pupil in the late 1790s, “Beethoven’s playing excelled in its extraordinary strength, character, and unprecedented bravura and fluency” (Newman, 1988: 79).

Table 1

| Most frequently performed composers for the fortepiano (all piano genres) in Vienna 1787–1810 |
|---|---|
| Beethoven | 33 (21% by female pianists) |
| Mozart | 26 (74% by female pianists) |
| Eberl | 11 (72% by female pianists) |
| Steibelt | 9 (39% by female pianists) |

Source: Morrow (1989), public and private concert calendars. Beethoven’s works were not performed in Vienna until after his arrival in that city at the end of 1792.
Chords rather than “pearly” passage work, leaps from one range to another, double octave statements of themes, extreme dynamic contrasts, legato articulation, abrupt changes of mood or tempo, startling rhythmic figures and broken phrases, Beethoven’s music called upon a pianist to engage in often abrupt, changeable and disconnected physical activities, activities that entailed and routinised suddenness of movement and surprise, movements which were the very antithesis of aristocratic corporeality and pianistic femininity but which were linked to an idea and imagery of the sublime and to an idea of the musical Genius as purveyor of that musical sublimity. That genius was masculine in conception, and Beethoven’s music was hailed as possessing “an earnest, manly style.”

To be a woman and to play Beethoven was to risk one’s decorum as a feminine being. To play Beethoven was to break with existing notions of feminine decorum, notions that stretched across Europe and back at least a century. The more overtly athletic styles of movement called for by Beethoven’s works would have posed practical difficulties for women, perhaps especially at a time when women’s fashions featured low cut and figure revealing muslin gowns. (Meanwhile, men’s fashions, post 1789, allowed increased freedom of movement as they became increasingly simplified, as men were, perhaps, de-aestheticised and, in comparison with women, became associated with action in the public sphere.) While such a display may have been a means of renegotiating the musical economy of audience attention and performer deference [for a man and, moreover, for a particular man—Beethoven, whose social connections made this innovation in the musical field possible (DeNora, 1995)], it also contravened mores of feminine propriety. Thus, simultaneously while Beethoven’s music configured a new culture of music reception centred upon the musician, and while this culture was established in part through Beethoven’s incorporation of bodily movement into his musical works, women were excluded from participation in this configuration. And as this social relation was repeated over time, music following the Beethovenian “model” came to be associated with a masculine musical sphere. At a time when, culturally, ideas about masculine strength and activity and about female passivity were still in formation, music served as a workspace where these ideas were not so much theorised as put into practice as a set of object lessons that illustrated (or could be read and were read as illustrating) men’s versus women’s work, musically speaking. For example, “forceful” composition and virtuosic flamboyance came to be associated with male musical workers. Increasingly, during the 19th century, women were edged out of performing the most fiery works in the repertoire and, in Vienna and elsewhere, came to function as conservators of musical taste (Ellis, 1997), performing mainly the works of earlier, less “manly” composers such as Mozart. [Indeed, Mozart came to be technologically “belittled” by being played on the post 1790s instruments that were, in terms of their resistance and capacity for dynamic range, “too big” for it (I am grateful to UCLA pianist Tom Beghin for this point).] In this way, the corporeal-gestural acts of performing music, as these came to be codified as “style” and social drama in music, came to afford the constitution of new notions of gender difference, and in this sense, music was active in effecting cultural change.
3.3. Practice becomes ideology—the sound of gender difference

Beethoven’s music served to structure the very models of “masculinity” that, with hindsight, some music scholars perceive as simply residing “in” Beethoven. Beethoven came to be associated with masculinity, I suggest, because the event of his music was increasingly appropriated by men; it was increasingly performed by men (and in particular by young men such as his pupil Ferdinand Rees, celebrated for his good looks) and performed by men as a gesture of strength and heroism. This process effected a form of segregation, effected through the ways that Beethoven’s music violated gendered conventions of music performance. But, and this point is key, as Beethoven’s music continued to be appropriated by male musicians, simultaneously it came to be hailed as “masculine” in nature, came to afford models of what manliness might look like. This process can be seen in this history of Beethoven iconography as well, where Beethoven in increasingly masculinized as he is canonised (see Comini, 1987, for examples of Beethoven imagery). This was a process of articulation, of building links between music and the extra-musical across time and space; it was not one in which Beethoven’s was simply “matched” with pre-existing notions of masculinity. To the contrary, in and through the acts of appropriating Beethoven, “masculinity” itself was defined and elaborated via musical exemplars, musical gestures, and music as gender object lesson.

It was, in other words, in and through its accumulation of masculinity that Beethoven came to be heard as emblematic of, as Schumann put it, “virile power” and in and through acts such as Schumann’s that Beethoven’s music came to accumulate its perceived “virility” such that it (and the Beethovenian virtuoso) came to be recognised as embodying fundamental traits of male-ness—ferocity, daring, unpredictability, power, and technical prowess. These links, between musical sounds and their social significances, were not present at the outset but were rather forged in and through practice and repeated practice—through the circumstances of Beethoven’s performance and through commentary upon his performance.

Key here is that the gender segregation as it initially formed around Beethoven’s music was not due to ideas about how Beethoven’s music “represented” masculine modes of being. That was something that came to coalesce around Beethoven over time. Initially, women avoided Beethoven in performance mainly because his music required them to do things at the piano that put them at a bodily disadvantage. Thus, the initial mechanism through which Beethoven’s music came to represent musical masculinity was through the gender segregation of its performance, which in turn allowed it to be read as a demonstration of what, musically, men could and should do and what women did not and should not do.

4. Conclusion

Beethoven’s music was not merely reflective of but helped constitute gender formation during the 19th century. This is because it provided a work space in which the modern image of the active, forceful, domineering, virile and controlling male
was elaborated—as the “Genius” and as the uncompromising, visceral, leonine figure (though also more high status a figure than the mere virtuoso).

Thus it is less interesting, sociologically, to make assumptions of a homological relationship between Beethoven’s compositional processes and masculine or misogynist culture and more interesting to tell a story that emphasises the mutual shaping of Beethoven’s music and the ideas and images with which it was associated. Through the circumstances surrounding its performance, Beethoven’s music came to be associated with masculinity and so helped to constitute 19th century ideas about the “difference” between men and women, musical differences and also extra-musical differences. As this occurred, Beethoven’s musical practices came to seem emblematic of masculinity because of the ways in which they came to be performed and because these performances came, in and through their visual-gestural and musical-gestural features, to be seen as delineating masculine modes of agency, came to serve as object lessons of such agency. To speak of this issue is not to seek to tell a story about pre-existing masculinity but rather to highlight how music is active and may take the lead in providing resources with which new, extra-musical forms are composed. It is in this sense that we may speak of music as it “gets into” social life and how, in this case, elite music during the 19th century came to provide a resource that afforded the thinking through of gender difference in the post-enlightenment modern era.

Acknowledgements

A special thanks to Tim Dowd for comments on this article and to Marco Santoro, Antoine Hennion, William Weber, and many others for comments on the in-progress work drawn upon here. This article is part of a larger study in progress, tentatively entitled Beethoven and His Bodies—Performing the Gendered Body in 19th Century Musical Life.

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Tia DeNora is Reader in Cultural Sociology at the University of Exeter. She is author of Beethoven and the Construction of Genius (California 1995/Fayard 1998) and Music in Everyday Life (Cambridge 2000). A treatise on music sociology, After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology is forthcoming. She is co-editor of the Music and Society series at Manchester University Press.