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Where Is She? Finding the Women in Electronic Music Culture

Freida Abtan

The author discusses the visibility and participation of women in electronic music culture. She argues that most electronic music social networks privilege male inclusion and success, and that skill-sharing is an important strategy to encourage women in the field. To seed this discussion, the author examines her own history with reflections on the gender dynamics within electronic music communities outside the academy, and the role that social and technical currencies play within them. She also discusses Ladies club, a music distribution project that led to several solo female electronic musicians taking the stage and organising events in Montreal during 2007.

Keywords: Electronic Music; Feminism; Gender; Culture; Skills-Sharing

I run a Music Computing programme at a leading art school: Goldsmiths, University of London. My life and my art practice revolve around sound. Until recently, I toured extensively and performed at many digital art and electronic music festivals. Mine was rarely one of more than a handful of female names in the programme. The academic world mirrors this dismal situation regarding the low representation of women. At conferences and workshops, there are always a few of us eyeing each other and asking ourselves: why are women still so under-represented in electronic music? Recently, this question has become a subject of popular debate, with Björk's high-profile interview on the subject featured in *Pitchfork* (see Hopper 2015), the activist website *female:pressure* attempting to chronicle a compendium of female electronic musicians (Electric Indigo),¹ and works such as Rodger's *Pink noises* (2010) hitting popular consciousness at the same time.

I once had a conversation with Janet Cardiff, a prolific Canadian sound installation artist. She spoke at length about how in the 1970s, unlike now, it would not have been acceptable to programme a high-profile music or arts festival with so few women on the bill.² In the arts, the slow gains of feminism seem a retreating mirage in a world

where few question whether its goals have been achieved. When doing my admissions work at Goldsmiths, the number of female candidates applying to Music Computing is so terrifyingly low as to seem anomalous. A colleague's informal survey of the gendering of Music faculty in the UK shows a discouraging landscape for women graduates,³ with the number of female lecturers pushing one in four. Looking around at recent New Interfaces for Musical Expression (NIME) conferences and seeing how few women were present there, I asked myself the same thing I did when playing those festivals. Where are all the women and why aren't they involved?

It's true that women face a unique set of pressures as performers of electronic music. They must often choose between sexualising themselves and being invisible in modern culture. For many, there is no right choice in a system so flawed. A fantastic, and very public, discussion on the subject took place in 2013, when Sinéad O'Connor wrote an open letter to Miley Cyrus, and Amanda Palmer responded to it.⁴ O'Connor (2013) stated, among other things, that: 'Real empowerment of yourself as a woman would be to in future refuse to exploit your body or your sexuality in order for men to make money from you'. To counter, Palmer (2013) asked that society 'give our young women the right weapons to fight with as they charge naked into battle, instead of ordering them to get back in the house and put some goddamn clothes on'. In other words, Palmer argued that female artists must be allowed to pick their own ways of presenting themselves without judgment, even through such thorny mechanisms as sexual provocation.

But being interested in performance is not the same thing as being interested in music production or other related practices. Not everyone wants, or is able, to present themselves in a sexual context to bring attention to their art, and even the most high-profile female music producers are rarely acknowledged for their technical contributions as separate from their voices or bodies. In Hopper's (2015) interview, 'The invisible woman: A conversation with Björk', Björk speaks out about how often her production work is misattributed to her male collaborators or simply ignored by the media. If a rich and famous woman such as Björk can't get acknowledgement for her technical work as a music producer, what chance do other women in the field have?⁵

While it is impossible to have a discussion about women in electronic music that doesn't acknowledge the twin difficulties of sexualisation and invisibility (see also Gadir 2016), these topics are not the main focus of this article. Instead, I want to examine my own history as an artist and educator to try to understand how to get more women involved in the technical aspects of electronic music, and to determine why women are so under-represented in this field.

As a musician, I have released a few solo albums, and appeared on several releases by a fairly well-known band.⁶ I'm always amazed at how, when people discuss those albums with me, they assume I simply added my voice to someone else's music, or worse. My work is part of a lineage of experimental music artists that includes such heroines as Cosi Fanni Tutti and Diana Rogerson, both of whom I'm sure were asked the same questions in their time. I am explicitly mentioning these women

because there were very few female artists visible in the experimental electronic music I was listening to growing up, and I would like to write about origins.

I've been making electronic music and other forms of technology-driven art for 20 years. I started when I was a computer science student. I was an avid electronic music fan, but I had never studied any form of instrument. As soon as I started programming computers, I had this epiphany that computers could *do* things. I immediately began to dream of using computers to make music. My first experiments were through programming, making sounds using numerical patterns in a language called Visual Basic, but I soon found sound editing software and immersed myself in experimentation. I couldn't play an instrument, so I would sing into a microphone or sample random objects from around my room, process their sounds beyond recognition and sequence those results into compositions. At the time, I didn't know there were other people who did this. I didn't think it was 'Art', and when I did find out there was an academic field called 'Electroacoustics' I wept, because the bar for entry seemed unbearably high. I was told I needed eight years of music theory behind me before I could be considered to study it formally.

At the time, most of my friends were male. They would get together to play around with electronics and make recordings. Some of these guys knew how to play their instruments, and some of them didn't. Very occasionally, a talented female instrumentalist was allowed to join them, but mostly, girls were only invited if they were dating one of the guys already involved. This mirrored the situation I saw in popular music where, seemingly without fail, women were either only contributing their voice or dating someone else deemed more important in the band. I desperately wanted to join my friends, but I was a late bloomer and, again, I didn't know how to play any instruments. I found it incredibly frustrating that the guys didn't need to be good at anything in order to come and experiment with sound in these social situations. To be included, all they needed to do was show up, while the girls needed some form of social or technical currency to barter.

I'm going to repeat what I just wrote because I think it's important: at a critical stage of experimentation, the boys were invited to make music before they had the necessary skills to be successful at it. The girls were only invited if they were someone's girlfriend or had pre-existing extensive technical knowledge. In the popular music arena, women were most likely to be included as vocalists. If we want to figure out why there aren't more women working in electronic music, this is where we need to start.

Electronic music is a DIY culture centred on youth. For most, there is a significant social component, not only in learning how to produce electronic music, but also in the performance and marketing of it. The necessary skills are passed around closed communities and friendship networks, which are often predominantly male; as a result, solo female artists have more difficulty acquiring them. The problem is compounded by social structures. There are fairly well documented behavioural differences in the gender-normative ways that young girls and boys learn. Girls tend to absorb knowledge through reading and verbal explanation, while young boys tend to favour active engagement.⁷ If there is a neurological basis for these differences

during early childhood, by adolescence any divergent behaviours have been stratified through repetition, cultural expectation and gender conditioning.

None of the girls I knew as a teenager taught each other how to do technical things.⁸ We read books and discussed the world, watched movies, talked about our families, our feelings, our thoughts, but we weren't really involved in skills-sharing unless it was related to school. When I wanted to participate in my friends' musical experimentation, I was joining a skills-sharing network that for them had been long established as male.

For many young women, entering an electronic music DIY-network is as awkward as trying to make friends with the schoolyard boys in the first grade. Even if each is friendly when you meet them one-on-one, you are not invited to the monkey bars when all the boys are there. I needed to find my own entry point into electronic music production, since there were so few people around for me to learn from. While I did eventually manage to join in on the experiments my friends were making, I also applied to an art school in Montreal where I was able to study electronic music production in an Electroacoustic Studies programme. It was there that I picked up the majority of my advanced skill set.

In many ways, this is the role of the academic institution: to correct for the bias in the social sphere and allow whoever can gain admission to learn the knowledge or techniques on offer. Montreal, a city with four universities each teaching a variant of electroacoustic music, had significantly more women involved in the music scene than I had otherwise ever seen, but this did not mean equal representation in either performance venues or educational institutions. In my electroacoustics classes, I noted that after the first year of study women were outnumbered by men by a ratio of 10 to 1—the same ratio I noted in my Computer Science classes during the mid-1990s. While many of the women in Montreal's experimental music scene fitted the mould of girlfriends and singers I had previously experienced, this did not diminish their artistic contributions, and a significant population had independently acquired sufficient technical skill to hold their own in their chosen music communities. These women were few but also fierce, competing in a domain without many role models or allies.

It wasn't only the universities in Montreal that helped produce so many female electronic musicians. Studio XX is a bilingual feminist art and technology centre aimed at helping to develop the careers and skills of self-identified women in technology-driven art and related professional fields.⁹ The centre offers residencies, workshops, special events and networking opportunities to Montreal's feminist-allied artistic community. The studio was founded in 1996 by four women: Sheryl Hamilton, Kim Sawchuck, Kathy Kennedy and Patricia Kearns, who 'were trying to find other alternative ways, outside of academia, that would actually make links between artists, activists, academics, and anybody' (Sawchuck, in Tripp, 2013). The centre is run collectively, with a board presiding over its major decisions.

In 2007, I briefly served as Studio XX's technical director and taught a few short courses, in one of which participants built simple audio circuits using such

components as contact microphones, amplifiers and light-controlled oscillators. I had previously taught a programming workshop at the Studio, aimed at web professionals who wanted to upgrade their skills. While the programming workshop was nothing revolutionary, other than perhaps its entirely female population, the electronics workshop felt completely different.

Kathy Kennedy, who attended the workshop, commented that the original goal of Studio XX was to encourage community-based sharing of skills and that she found it much more effective than the top-down authoritarian model of instruction. While her comments seemed targeted towards all teaching, there is an obvious crossover between the skills associated with DIY electronics design and the craft culture traditionally cultivated within female society. For starters, the workshop involved a lot of physical and repetitive 'doing', with significant community support, and lots of opportunities for correction and discussion, mimicking the identifying hallmarks of craft culture (see Bratich & Brush, 2011, p. 240). More importantly, the social component of the gathering encouraged its results. Generations of women have passed craft-based knowledge from one-to-another in the exact same way.

I was working on a circuit in the middle of the group when I suddenly realised that around me were 12 women, all of whom seemed interested in the same modes of music-making that I was. We all lived in the same city and I had never met most of them before. With a quick show of hands, I asked how many of the workshop participants were electronic musicians, how many of them created music alone, and how many performed. I was surprised to find that many of the participants made electronic music and had an independent practice, but almost none of them were performing publicly. Several of these women had graduated from the city's various electroacoustic music programmes, while others were self-taught, being avid fans of electronic music.

It was clear that even though these women had well-developed artistic practices, they were unable to graduate into participation within their local music community in Montreal. They each had the necessary technical skills to produce and perform their own music, but few contacts outside of their academic circles. Importantly, the necessary knowledge they missed wasn't theoretical but social, deeply local, and always in a state of change. It involved details such as who was promoting other similar acts in town, how to book specific venues, knowledge of performers with whom to collaborate on events, and skills about how to do self-promotion. They needed to be informed of local opportunities for music publishing or distribution, festivals and other performance opportunities. Mostly, they needed to know where and to whom to submit their work in order to take advantage of those opportunities, and how to meet the criteria for selection. If a musical act is sufficiently promising, they may attract a manager or agent to shape their success, but this help is rare outside of commercial culture. Instead, dense social networks of young musicians teach each other the necessary skills to do these things for themselves at the level of their community. Not having enough social engagement with other performing musicians was preventing these women from growing to the next stage of their careers. But these social networks were almost entirely populated by young men, along with those they vetted through

sexual and social means. Without the required social currency to enter these networks, aspiring female musicians were unable to join or learn from them.

My story has a happy ending. With the help of one of the ladies involved in the Studio XX workshop, who co-ran an independent label, we created a series of compilations called *Ladies club*, which featured the work of many women from the electronics workshop. The series encouraged the featured artists to prepare a track for release, but also taught them how to book and promote shows, and to rely on each other to fill them. I'm happy to report that this small collaboration helped push many of these women electronic musicians into more visible practices where they were able to continue organising the culture they had always wanted to participate in.

The two volumes of *Ladies club* were 3-inch CD-Rs, pressed in small editions with professional covers. They were explicitly designed to fit a distribution method local to Montreal: the distributor machines¹⁰—that is, repurposed cigarette machines that vend small artist handicrafts for CAD \$2 apiece, which served as a surprisingly effective method for music distribution between local musicians. A show was held for each launch, which all the included artists were encouraged to help promote and organise, guided by the project creators. The most important long-term result of the *Ladies club* initiative was not the CD-Rs, but the experience and community that came about from the launch parties. Further events were organised by several of these musicians after the experience, fuelled by the positive feedback they received from their performances.

There are currently a growing number of projects that make use of community-building and skills-sharing practices to help women engage with electronic music culture. One notable example is Rock Camp for Girls,¹¹ a large alliance of local organisations that offer young women the chance to build rock bands and perform their music under guidance from older female performers and technicians. While Rock Camp aims to provide role models to the young women involved, part of their success stems from their summer camp model, which creates an atmosphere of community and inclusion. Recently, TECHNE, the electronic music teaching organisation run by Suzanne Thorpe and Bonnie Jones,¹² has introduced a DIY electronics component to several of these retreats.¹³ The success of the Rock Camp model is inspiring similar programmes, such as *GEMS* or Girls' Electronic Music Seminar,¹⁴ now being staged for the first time as a summer intensive workshop at New York University directed by Daphna Naphtali.

Now when people ask me how to get more women involved in electronic music culture, I have two answers: *share your skills with them*; but also: *share your friends with them*. I tell them to remember that culture is something that we build together, by doing and by teaching each other how to do things. Host a workshop. Throw some shows. Promote each other's work. Open up your files and show each other what you're making and, more importantly, show each other how you're making it. Help each other to get your art out into the world. Don't worry if you don't already know how to be involved: we are all going to build the future of music together.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

- [1] Electric Indigo. About female:pressure. female:pressure. Retrieved May 01, 2015, from <http://www.femalepressure.net/fempres.html>
- [2] This discouraging trend has been documented by many, including popular blogs *Crack in the Road* and *SheKnows*. See Dalton (2015) and Cannon (2015).
- [3] An informal survey completed by Ksenia Pestova in 2013 counted 110 women and 327 men listed as faculty on the websites of UK Universities: see Pestova (2013).
- [4] Miley Cyrus is an American actress and pop singer, while Amanda Palmer is an American musician well known for her work with the Dresden Dolls, a pioneering band in the ‘dark cabaret’ genre.
- [5] This question was directly posed to me by Bevin Kelley, performing artist Blevin from Blechdom.
- [6] Nurse With Wound.
- [7] The hippocampus, associated with memory and verbalisation, is larger and more developed in girls’ brains, while boys’ develop the cortical area, related to spatial-mechanical functioning. Gurian and Stevens (2004) claim that this developmental difference, along with others in the corpus callosum and increased activity in the prefrontal cortex, lead girls towards ‘stimulants—like reading and writing—that involve complex texture, tonality, and mental activity’ while boys are drawn to ‘watching and manipulating objects that move through physical space and understanding abstract mechanical concepts’.
- [8] With the exception of crafts, the production of which is traditionally female dominated and which are often used as a means of social gathering.
- [9] Studio XX (2015). Studio XX’s Mandate. Studio XX: Femmes + Art + Technologie + Société | Women + Art + technology + Society. Retrieved May 1, 2015, from <http://www.studioxx.org/en/mandat>.
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