

Sing Us a Song; You're the Piano Man: The Patriarchal Discourse of Music Education

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This article examines the discourse of music education within the paradigm of the social structure of patriarchy. It argues that this system, which, in sociologist Allan G. Johnson's words, "promotes male privilege by being male dominated, male identified, and male centered," is so pervasive in music education that even a music lesson in which both participants are female does not escape the effects. Through analysis of a transcript of an all-female music lesson, with particular focus on pedagogy, physical indoctrination, and metaphor, the experience will be revealed for what it truly is: a subconscious indoctrination into a patriarchal system.

Patriarchy is not usually associated with private piano lessons, particularly if the participants are a middle-aged Asian woman wearing a windbreaker and sweatpants and a high school-aged white female dressed in a jacket, T-shirt, and basketball shorts. However, in this essay, I will argue that music lessons and their participants are influenced by the patriarchal ideologies present in this male-dominated system. Allan G. Johnson defines patriarchy as a system that "promotes male privilege by being male dominated, male identified, and male centered" and "is also organized around an obsession with control and involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women" (5). Using his definition as a lens for analysis, I will examine a transcript from a private piano lesson to show how the relationship between the interlocutors (audience and rhetor) is reinforcing a masculine way of behaving. Drawing on Julia Koza's theory in "My Body Had a Mind of Its Own: On Teaching, the Illusion of Control, and the Terrifying Limits of Governmentality (Part 2)" and initiation-response-evaluation (I-R-E), I will show the rhetorical power of language by unpacking the pedagogical imbalance of power between teacher and student, the physical indoctrination of body movement performed by the teacher on the student, and the pervasive use of masculine metaphors by the teacher.

Classical music education has had a long history of being dominated by male composers such as Beethoven and Mozart. In contemporary society, "The composers studied in school are male, as are most of the conductors and lead performers of such music" (McGregor and Mills 223). According to Johnson, this would be initial evidence to support that classical music is a patriarchal system, since it is dominated by men.

In addition to the biological evidence, masculinity is reflected in the focus of music educators on "hegemonic masculine . . . values of 'competitiveness, rigor, masterfulness'"—in other words, the definition of success for the patriarchal system of music education (Gould 46). Competitiveness, rigor, and masterfulness are certainly part of the context of the music lesson. If a student does not perform the lesson well—display "masterfulness" over it—she will lose face with the teacher, who will assume that the student did not practice with as much "rigor" as she should have. Beyond the private lesson, this perception can have significant consequences; should the student do poorly at a performance, the society of music educators will interpret this inadequate performance as a lack of "competitiveness, rigor, masterfulness" on the part of both student and

teacher. Should the teacher not emphasize these qualities in her instruction, the student can hardly be blamed for not fulfilling the audience's expectations. Thus, in order for this activity to achieve its goals, the teacher must impart the patriarchal values as successfully as the student must take them in.

In order for the teacher to convey the values of competitiveness, mastery, and rigor to her students, she controls the conversation through an I-R-E sequence. Not only are the imparted values those of patriarchal ideologies, the method by which they are passed on displays the "obsession with control" articulated in Johnson's definition. The I-R-E sequence is defined as an interaction between teacher and student that begins with the teacher's "initiation act." If the student responds incorrectly, the teacher will implement "a number of strategies, including prompting after incorrect or incomplete replies and repeating or simplifying initiation acts, to obtain the reply called for by the initiation act" (Mehan 141). According to Julia Koza, this common pedagogical methodology is especially prevalent in music education, whose discourse has a "persistent, almost obsessive interest in controlling self and others" (Koza 5). Koza goes on to assert that "music is a uniquely effective tool for achieving social control of individuals and groups" and that "music training teaches children discipline" (10). In effect, it is in the best interest of the teacher to control her student so as to ensure that the student develops "discipline" and self-control.

In my transcript, the teacher's domination of the conversation exemplifies this interest in control. I-R-E sequences occur sixteen times within the transcript, and of the 110 turns of talk, only 16 of them are not part of a sequence. Also, while the teacher and student have nearly equal numbers of turns of talk, 56 for the teacher and 54 for the student, the teacher's turns are much longer. The transcript is a little less than seven minutes long, and within this time frame the teacher says around 900 words, the student barely more than 100. An example of this combination of I-R-E sequence with teacher-dominated conversation can be seen in a portion of the transcript that occurs near the end of the lesson. The teacher's "initiation act" is to tell the student to play a scale, to which the student responds accordingly. After the student is finished, the teacher evaluates the response with the word "Beautiful!", which is emphatically spoken in a delighted tone. The student, however, responds to the teacher's evaluation in a way that causes the teacher to ask, "What? Are you surprised?" (Young 3). When the student responds affirmatively, the teacher goes on to explain why she thought the student did well, continuing to expand on her explanation until met with an affirmative "Yeah" from the student, rather than a noncommittal "Mmm." By refusing to move on until the student's response matches the teacher's expectations, the teacher influences the student to subconsciously associate the approved responses with a feeling of progress. Using this rhetorical technique, this dominating method of pedagogy is reinforced.

The music lesson serves as the platform for other persuasive techniques, such as verbally emphasizing the importance of certain body motions that are associated with a successful way of being. According to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, this type of body enculturation is known as *habitus*, in which "through a myriad of mundane processes of training and learning . . . the individual acquires a set of dispositions which literally mold the body and become second nature" (Bourdieu and Thompson 12). These processes are not just physical behaviors, they "are the product of history and, at the same time, the source of practices and perceptions which reproduce history" (13). At one point in her life, the teacher was physically indoctrinated in this patriarchal obsession with control that is inherent within music education, and she is now passing on the bodily ideologies, this *habitus*, to her student.

This transmission of patriarchal ideologies is aided by music education's focus on the repeated practice of motion, specifically on physical control of the hands moving up and down the keyboard. For example, when the student in the transcript is asked two minutes into the lesson to describe any problems she has been having since the last lesson, her only complaint is that her "left

hand isn't working as fast as [her] right hand." This problem occupies the rest of the lesson, and variations of the word "hand" are repeated nine times. However, when responding to the student's complaint, the teacher does not focus on the hands but on the student's body as a whole, saying that the student's head "has to be right between the two hands" and that she must "move along with it" (Young 2). In other words, the student's head must be positioned between her two hands while playing to ensure that the head and torso are synchronized with the hands. In a sense, the entirety of the student's body needs to be controlled in order to exemplify the qualities valued by the institution of music education.

Additionally, the teacher comments on how the student was "waving [her] hands like ehh," implying that the student was indecisive in her movements, and that avoidance of this would give her "good security right away." As the lesson continues, the teacher lists more body movements for the student to follow, including how she must "curve those fingers in. . . .Because if [she] curve[s] them they're firm and [she'll] be sure to get 'em" (Young 2). The word "fingers" is repeated three times, each time associated with the specific position of being "curve[d]" so as to be "firm," further exemplifying the emphasis of control of the body in order to achieve success in music. In effect, this "work of inculcation through which the lasting imposition of the arbitrary limit is achieved," that of the fingers being "firm," "can seek to naturalize the decisive breaks that constitute an arbitrary cultural limit—those expressed in fundamental oppositions like masculine/feminine, etc." (Bourdieu and Thompson 123). After this music lesson, which emphasizes the "arbitrary cultural limit" of masculinity, whenever the student sits down to play, she will in all likelihood recall this lesson in such a way that it will directly impact her playing. Whether she consciously remembers the words of her teacher or subconsciously replicates the desired body movements through muscle memory, the ideologies of music education will be stamped as incontrovertibly on her movements as a tattoo is on the body. This is a likely result not only because of the teacher's dominance of the conversation and the constant references to parts of the body but because of the teacher's building of complex metaphors derived from masculine qualities during the entirety of the activity.

By building metaphors through the repeated verbal association of success with male-dominated realms of society, the teacher not only effectively influences the student to adhere to the patriarchal system of music education; she also instills an appreciation of the male-dominated society in the student. Metaphor, in the words of linguist George Lakoff, can be used to

create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. Such actions will, of course, fit the metaphor. This will in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make the experience. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies. (Lakoff and Johnson 156)

While the teacher makes direct use of metaphor in order to create said "guide[s] for future action" in the technique lesson, she is by no means the only one propagating these "self-fulfilling" metaphors in music education. Koza states that pedagogy itself functions on what Lakoff termed the "Strict Father Metaphor," a "model . . . that places a premium on control, discipline, punishment, and obedience to authority" (Koza 11). She builds her argument on Lakoff's metaphor; Lakoff, she says, "clearly indicates that the metaphor is patriarchal; the model is a strict *father*, not a strict parent." Koza goes on to argue that "given that teachers are charged to act *in loco parentis*, it is relatively simple to transfer the strict father family model to power relations in classrooms" (12). In effect, the teacher uses this all-encompassing metaphor in her pedagogy as a springboard for her own formation of patriarchal metaphors.

In the transcript, we see that this formation of metaphors is initialized by the student herself, who comments around two and a half minutes into the lesson on how her "left hand isn't working as fast as [her] right hand, and then everything gets jumbled . . . [and] kind of crashes" (Young 2).

The goal of the student here is to be “fast,” as if she were a competitor in a race or other form of competition. Getting in the way of this goal is her “jumbled” state, signifying a complete lack of control that causes her to eventually “crash,” as if she were operating a racecar that ran into a wall. Not only is it her objective to display a quality valued by the patriarchal institution of music education, but the metaphor she uses to convey the lack of it is grounded in “male-dominated” realms of society: athletics and cars. This patriarchal state of mind continues throughout the conversation, as the goal of being “fast” is firmly established by variations of the word being repeated six times within the transcript, mostly in the middle of the activity.

The teacher strengthens the competitive sport metaphor by using variations of the word “start” seven times in the lesson, occurring mainly in the middle and at the end. Five of these usages involve words that build on the metaphor of athleticism; for example, the teacher says: “You started sooo beautifully, and then you go on and suddenly you’re running over everything.” The teacher is referring to the student’s fingers messing up on the keys, but the phrase “running over everything” brings to mind a racecar yet again, one which this time lost control after it started and ran over everything in its path. Later on, the teacher says:

You were just, y’know, stuttering around, ’cause when you start, sometimes you’re just kinda like, I’m, okay, stiff. . . . That’s the lifesaver of everything, almost everything, ’cause if you’re going to use it, get your [head] between the two hands, then you’re going to feel much more secure. (Young 3)

The words “stuttering” and “stiff” appearing together in the same sentence tie together the ideas of lack of control being caused by lack of adequate preparation, “stiff” bringing to mind athletic preparation such as stretching. This complex metaphor continues with the use of the words “lifesaver” and “secure” implying that fixing this lack of control with proper preparation would not only give the student control, it would in effect save her within the patriarchal system of music education.

However, the qualities of athleticism and control in the male-dominated realm of sports are not the only ones invoked here. Just before the student plays through the scales for the first time, the teacher tells her to “keep on point,” as if she were a ballerina about to perform a pirouette on the tips of her toe (Young 2). A ballet metaphor may not seem patriarchal at first glance, as members of the ballet are popularly assumed to be female, in contrast to the assumed maleness of racecar drivers, but in reality the history of ballet has been one of female performers controlled by males. Author Deirdre Kelly describes in her book *Ballerina* that in France during the eighteenth century, the “ballerina-as-concubine was an open secret in French society,” so much so that the Paris Opera kept a registry with female dancers’ names and the corresponding names of their male “protectors.” She blames the male director-choreographer Georges Balanchine for the “unrealistic physical ideal” that was the goal of every one of his ballerinas, an ideal that is maintained to this day (qtd. in Small 1). In light of this history, not only is the teacher influencing her student through metaphors of athletic control, she is also subtly reminding her of her responsibilities as a female performer, one who is expected to do her best for the patriarchal society of music education. Combined with the emphasis on control inherent in the goal of the activity, the teacher’s active control over the conversation, and the body enculturation occurring in the form of *habitus*, this use of metaphor is a powerful display of the patriarchy that is present throughout the transcript.

While a piano technique lesson does not seem predominately masculine, the patriarchal system of music education is indeed apparent in many forms during the activity. As discussed by Koza, music education’s inherently pedagogical nature adheres to the “Strict Father Metaphor,” a metaphor whose emphasis on control is very much evident in the goals and activities of music education. This stress on control is even more pronounced in the efforts of the teacher to imprint ideological messages on the student’s body, ensuring that the patriarchal ideologies will show them-

selves in the student's *habitus*, regardless of whether the student consciously advocates them herself. Continuing this patriarchal indoctrination is the teacher's persistent use of metaphor, which builds on the "Strict Father Metaphor" with references to male-dominated aspects of society such as athletics, cars, and even the more subtly male-controlled world of ballet. Both teacher and student subconsciously submit to and promote aspects of patriarchy within their discourse of music education, and not once does either participant question the benefits of being "fast" or the point in participating in an activity so heavily focused on competition and control. The technique lesson is ultimately successful, as the transcript ends with the student performing to the expectations of both the teacher and the overarching patriarchal system of music education, neither one suspecting the indoctrinating nature of the activity they have just participated in.

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