

## **EMBODIMENT and EMPOWERMENT**

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I started playing the trumpet the same year I got my period. I'm sure I didn't recognize this co-occurrence as significant at the time; these were just two of many new things I was learning to navigate in my 13th year of life. I grew up in the American Deep South, and, although my family was a refuge from the hyper-conservative Christian culture - my body and understanding of gender was still existing and changing within the context of a country that codified the binary belief that women existed because of and for men.

The Bible says women should be silent. Obedient. The Bible also tells the story of the sound of trumpets bringing down the walls of Jericho. This is the instrument I had chosen.

For most, the hyper-masculine stereotype of brass instruments needs no introduction and little to no explanation. We've all heard it and likely all seen it. In Western classical music cultures, this often takes the sonic form of a fanfare or an allusion to a fanfare: the regimental blasts of the hero arriving or a victory being achieved, played by one of the men in the ranks with any variations in tone ironed out, like wrinkles in an army uniform.

Despite the historical truth that this is not the only use of brass over time, and certainly not the predominant one in non-Western traditions, it is the one that has been cemented into cultural consciousness. This is true to the extent that much of brass composition revolves around either indulging in or denying a brass instrument's militaristic connotation. In new music, "the new", pioneering, or general rebelliousness don't always absolve issues of gender, as frontier-ism usually codes male as well. womxn are often not welcome on the frontlines of any battle - actual, metaphorical, or cultural.

The idea that the sound of brass instruments is inherently masculine could be debated, especially on a piece-to-piece basis. Of course, some newer works do find ways - compositionally, theatrically, or otherwise - to exist outside of the dominant narrative of a brass battalion, but brass performance and the pedagogy upon which it is based still has its roots deep in the soil of male-centric experience and values masculine uniformity in both physicality and tone.

I began this research a few years ago, focusing on how theatrical movements prescribed by a score encouraged student musicians to be more embodied in their performances and

whether this practice had any effect on their overall confidence. Since then, I've moved to asking the broader question, "How can we nourish the body/music symbiosis?" focusing, particularly on embodied practices among performers who have experienced some form of trauma. With concert halls shut and rehearsals on pause, the pandemic gave me the time and opportunity to connect with a network of female, trans, and non-binary brass players, to hear their music and stories and to try to give more context to the vast amount of shared bodily knowledge among these brass womxn.

Similar to singing, the sound-producing vibrations in brass playing are created by the flesh. The sound amplified by a brass instrument is therefore the sound of the musician's body. The body is not just an initiator of sound, it *is* the sound. This fact makes the brass musician's body central to the pedagogy, criticism, and culture of brass music and a particular case to consider in discussions on gender, performance, and embodied practices.

The brass field has been dominated by cis men for decades, meaning the successful players and teachers who build the prevailing pedagogy are cis men and the resulting widely accepted brass methods are all based upon a cis man's anatomy and experience. With the body as the focus of a male-centric pedagogy, the womxn's body becomes a disability.

Female-specific anatomy and other aspects of the body that are culturally considered feminine are often sexualized or fetishized by modern patriarchal consumer culture. These body parts also happen to be essential tools in brass playing. The lips, hands, chest, and breath have been claimed by some men as objects or indicators of male pleasure, so the mechanization of these parts of the womxn's body - especially to do a task that is culturally considered masculine - can be both empowering to womxn and threatening to men.

Essentialism is the notion that woman is innately closer to nature while man is divorced from nature, becoming instead one who controls it. Virtuosity in music is therefore often considered a male quality. Especially in brass playing where many of the instruments have a physically phallic quality and are similarly described with male-coded words such as "strong" or "penetrating", womxn who excel are regarded as "less" feminine in the eyes of cis men.

Part of the institutionalization and maintenance of gender is the creation of gendered spaces, and brass playing has become a gendered space. The masculinized nature of brass playing reinforces this and the space in turn helps to maintain the male-domination of brass playing. In this way, the brass world has become a kind of fraternity, in which womxn who want to gain success must either be granted access or rise above the need entirely.

When trying to enter this “boys club,” womxn walk the line of being a sexual possibility or “just one of the guys,” and, ultimately neither, are often ignored. Those who do make it in are often both the subject and the audience of locker room talk. womxn brass players in this situation will sometimes compensate physically for their intrusion into these male spaces either by playing up or down feminine or masculine elements of themselves to appease their audience of colleagues or by adopting postures to make themselves smaller - to take up less of this “male space” - and thereby seem less threatening to the masculine identities of their peers or minimize their physical impact as “other”.

In Western classical music, masculinity usually isn't heard in music, it is assumed. The gender of a cis man or male-experience based piece of music isn't apparent to the listener. It is only when an “other” assumes the stage, or begins telling their story musically, that the gender becomes recognizable to the listener. Due to both the male pedagogical and extra-musical connotations of brass music, these “unorthodox” stories or sounds are usually just heard as “incorrect.” This is particularly an issue for womxn who play their own music because they are doubling down on their musical presence as a womxn. The womxn's experience both on display and being voiced compositionally by a brass player violates every rule, from pedagogy to performance to content, and is almost never welcomed - causing even bigger issues for the lasting repertoire. In the words of one womxn, “‘Different’ is not accepted in the brass world.”

However, despite male influence in both brass music and pedagogy, providing a musician with a brass instrument is to provide them with a tool through which to amplify their body. Whilst the human voice often betrays the biological sex of the speaker or singer, a brass instrument's sound is the same across genders, and within patriarchal domesticity, a trumpet can be a threatening antithesis to the soft, lullaby-singing mother.

Some philosophers have posited that the pursuit of creative identity is fundamental to human dignity. How we create is tied to our experiences and identity, and our gender identities are often formed through the interaction between our personal expressions and the expectations of society or institutions. When womxn become locked into male-centric modes of creative communication, they are not afforded the opportunity to speak their own language and to their own experiences and are unable to normalize the womxn's experience - whether it's singing a lullaby or tearing down walls - or even claim this essential element of human-ness.

In Western cultures subordinate groups are tasked with carrying the burden of identity assignments: womxn have gender, but men do not; LGBTQ members have sexuality, but straight people do not. When womxn become musicians - especially brass players - they become womxn brass players. Many womxn find that this delineation marginalizes their

talents or distracts from what they see as the universal nature of their musical output, and in the tradition of classical music, this instinct is exacerbated by the regard given to the music or the composer as “godly” and autonomous which regards the body a mere vessel of inspiration or creation and subliminally encourages the performer to become disembodied.

But regardless of the level of perceived universalism or autonomy of the music, the body is on display in traditional concert formats, and for womxn, display is often sexualized beyond the already fetishized elements of the womxn’s body. Even a womxn playing the most “autonomous” of music is at risk of being subjected to critique or comment on appearance, which is partially encouraged by modern beauty standards. Especially for brass-playing womxn, the music is often not delineated from the body, due to the pedagogy’s focus on the body of the performer. womxn whose gender is more apparent in some way - either because of their body type or accoutrements - are seen as dealing injury to the perceived autonomy of the music or the inherently “masculine” nature of the instrument and therefore considered poor musicians.

When a performer engages in display they wear a metaphorical mask that both presents and protects. This is true whether or not the performance is specifically theatrical, although in music theater the mask could be imagined as a larger one: the performer presents a character other than themselves and therefore protects themselves. In the first stage of my research where I investigated how composed movement affected the confidence of student performers, I found that the students used these movements to mobilize their body within their playing and that the movements provided a type of character for them to “take on” - releasing them from any previously imposed restrictions on their personal performance.

I found this to be true in my own playing as well. Working on more theatrical pieces or applying a theatrical approach to old repertoire allowed me to wear a protective mask that shielded me from the expectations of how I as a woman would play and instead - perhaps paradoxically - play how I as a woman actually play. This awareness also opens doors to the possibility of weaponizing the mask one wears while performing, which can further empower the performer. Although this practice does not erase issues of discrimination or sexism, the understanding of the ecosystem of gendered spaces and display gives womxn performers access to a greater variety of tools against a system that would seek to disenfranchise them.

Visible aspects of a performer remain attached to the body and at a distance from an audience member, and therefore allows the audience member to mitigate their experience with any visual aspect of the performance or performer. The visual experience is controlled by the experiencer, not by elements or actors in its environment. This so-called “visual hegemony” encourages projection into the world, not subjection to it.

Sound, conversely, is created by the performer and travels through both time and space to be unselectively heard by an audience member, regardless of almost any attempt to control the sonic experience. It will even resonate inside the body of the listener. For this reason, sound - more than other elements of the senses - can be used to communicate bodily knowledge and experience. To hear a musical voice, is to hear a story, to have new knowledge within one's own body of the body and life which produced it - to literally feel and understand.

Sound connects the outer and inner worlds of existence. Sound amplifies and is amplified by the sounding body. For the womxn brass player, the instrument gives the body more space - perhaps the space womxn's bodies have long been denied - and allows the voice to be carried far beyond its natural limits and into male spaces without knocking on the door.

Trumpets have long been used as signaling instruments. In the hands of womxn, they signal change.

Every womxn in brass has stories: stories of discrimination, of physical change, of assaults on their mind and body, of healing. In 2021, much of the world is reckoning with the effects of white supremacy and with a virus that has exposed the inequities of our societies. We have been forced to understand the power of the air we all breathe and what it means when someone says, "I can't breathe."

To breathe is to take the first step in speaking and telling our stories. To breathe is to be rebellious against institutions that would keep us small and silent. To breathe is to be radical and resilient. To breathe is to be embodied and empowered.

I certainly don't have all the answers and likely not even all the questions, but I am encouraged by the music, and I believe I'm beginning to see cracks in the walls around Jericho.

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