

LIMITED MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS CHOICE: A GENDER STEREOTYPE

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Abstract

It has been observed that certain musical instruments are generally regarded as masculine or feminine. This rather erroneous notion arises either from the size of the instruments, the volume of sound produced by them or the physical exertion needed to play them. Thus, instrument like the Double Bass, Trumpet and Trombone are viewed as men's or boys' instruments while the flute, violin, and viola are regarded as women's or girls'¹ instruments. The problem posed by this gender misconception is that some students who could have excelled on these instruments shy away from studying them to avoid the attendant stigma. The goal of this paper, therefore, is to refute this gender bias and encourage students to study the instruments for which they have the interest and potentials to excel.

Introduction

Music is an art that finds expression either in vocal renditions or instrumental performances. Whereas the voice is an organic part of man, which, with his first cries at birth, he had begun to use or learn to use, mechanical instruments are not. To employ any of these therefore, he has to acquire and learn to play on it. In the orchestral context, there is a broad spectrum of instruments to choose from. There are instruments of the Woodwind family, Bass family, Percussion family and String family. A detailed list of these shall be made later,

It has however, been observed that in making this choice, some inhibitions exist as a consequence of the feminine or masculine character ascribed to some of these instruments. The flute for instance has been described as being weak and "girly". In other words, it is not an instrument for boys or men. It goes without saying therefore, that anyone with this gender-influenced notion will see any boy or man playing the flute as weak and in an ensemble where such stereotype exists, males will avoid playing the flute to escape the stigma. This paper is aimed at showing that no instrument is meant exclusively for either of the sexes and in doing this we shall discuss this paper from the following perspectives:

- Conceptual clarifications.
- Catalogue of musical instruments.
- Constraints to Musical instruments choice.
- Comments on the way forward
- Conclusion.

Conceptual Clarifications

- > **Gender:** Okeke (2004) defined gender as those socio-culturally defined roles and psychological characters ascribed to females and males by various societies. Therefore, a male who exhibits behaviour expected of females is stigmatized. Gender is therefore not the same as "sex" even though sometimes the two words are wrongly used interchangeably. Sex refers to the biological make-up of someone that physically and physiologically make that person female or male.
- > **Gender Stereotype:** Is a collection of commonly held beliefs or opinions about what are "appropriate" behaviours, actions, and activities for females (feminine) and for male (masculine) Okeke (ibid). The notion that the trumpet should be played only by males is an example of this.
- > **Musical Instruments Choice:** Refers to an individual's decision to study or perform on a given instrument or instruments. An individual's musical instrument choice is limited when he fails or refuses to study or perform on certain musical instruments. This paper focuses on the limitation of such choice arising from gender stereotyping.

Catalogue of Musical Instruments

We do not intend here to make a list of all the instruments available in the world. Doing so would be like attempting to number the stars in the sky or count the grains of sand at the sea shore. We shall therefore, limit ourselves to western orchestral and band instruments and perhaps some popular music instruments.

All instruments are either acoustic or electrical. Sound is created on and amplified on the body of an acoustic instrument. Electrical instruments need a supply of electricity before they can make a musical sound. Acoustic instruments might belong to the strings, woodwind, brass, keyboard or percussion family while electrical instruments are either electric or electronic, Tatchell (1992:54). The following list of instruments is grouped according to these families.

Woodwind Instruments

- Recorders- Soprano, Descant, Treble, Tenor, Bass.
- Flutes - Piccolo, concert flute, Alto flute, Bass flute.
- Oboe - Oboe, Cor Anglais (English Horn), Bassoon, Contrabassoon.
- Clarinets - E Flat (Soprano) Clarinet, B Flat (Alto) Clarinet, Bass horn, Bass Clarinet and Double (Contrabass) Clarinet.
- Saxophones- Soprano sax, Alto sax, Tenor sax, Baritone sax.

Brass Instruments

French Horn

Bugle

Cornet

Flugelhorn

Trumpets - Natural (valveless) Trumpet, Standard Trumpet, Piccolo Trumpet.

Saxhorns - H flat tenor horn, B flat tenor tuba or euphonium, B flat baritone, B flat bass tuba.

Percussion Instruments

Percussion instruments are either tuned or untuned; that is, they can either be used to lay melodies or simply play rhythmic accompaniments.

Untuned Percussion

Drums - Side or Snare drum, tom-tom, Tenor drum, Bass drum, Bongos, Conga, Timbales.

Rattles-Maracas, Cabaca

Cymbals - Clash Cymbals, Crash Cymbals, Hi-hat cymbals, Finger cymbals.

Gong or tamtam

Tambourine

Triangle

Wind machine

Guero

Tuned Percussion

Timpani

Xylophone

Marimba

Metallophones - Vibraphone, Glockenspiel, Celesta.

Chimes- Tubular bells, Chime bars, Cowbells.

Steel drum

Keyboard instruments

These are divided into those that make sounds from vibrating strings and those that make sound from a vibrating column of air. In other words, a keyboard instrument (apart from an electrical one) is either a stringed instrument or a wind instrument.

Stringed Keyboard Instruments

Clavichord
Harpsichord Upright
Piano Grand Piano

Wind Keyboard Instruments

Pipe organ
Harmonium

Stringed Instruments

Harp
Zither
Guitar
Mandolin
Violin
Viola
Violoncello
Double Bass

Electrical instrument

As stated earlier, these are either electric or electronic. An electric instrument uses electricity to amplify sound waves instead of using a sound box. On the other hand, an electronic instrument uses electricity to make sounds as well as to amplify them.

Electric Instruments

Electric guitar Bass
guitar Electric organ
Electric violin

Electronic Instruments

Keyboard Synthesizer Drum
Synthesizers Ondes martenot

It might be worth repeating that the foregoing list is not limited to the regular orchestral instruments even though the usual categorization has been largely followed. However some instruments not previously regarded as orchestral instruments, like the saxophone, are now part of the symphony orchestra. The introduction of the saxophone into the orchestra, though, did not start in the symphony orchestra but in the opera Ingham (1998).

Constraints to Musical Instruments Choice

Before we proceed to discuss the limitation of musical instrumental choice as a fall out of gender stereotype let us mention some non-gender factors that could inhibit participation in some instrumental functions.

Physical/Physiological Impediment

Schumann (1810-1856) was focused on making a career as a pianist but found his fourth finger rather too slow to move independently. He thought he would take a short cut by trying it back to force it to lift up but unfortunately, he permanently damaged his hand, putting paid to a career as a pianist, Warburton (1955:85). Schumann's case, illustrates the fact that physical/physiological impediment could limit an individual's musical instrumental role. An amputee who lacks one hand obviously cannot make a career as a guitarist neither can an individual who lost his teeth in an accident make a career as a trumpeter though he could be a violinist, guitarist, cellist, Double Bassist etc.

Aural Impediment

A tone deaf individual who cannot hear the difference between tones would be obviously hindered in his efforts to learn a melodic instrument, he might at best end up as a percussionist playing only untuned percussions.

Ritual Impediment

This may not apply in the Western context but in African societies, it is not uncommon for performance on an instrument to be restricted as a result of the ritual attachment of the instruments) concerned. We have observed that some instruments are deemed to be feminine or masculine apparently from their size; volume of sound produced by them and the physical exertion needed to perform on them. Harrison (2001), observed:

In 1978, Abeles and porter found that there is a masculine-feminine continuum of instrument choice. In their study, tertiary students were asked to place instruments on a continuum from most feminine to most masculine. They found flute and violin to be on the feminine end and trombone and drums on the masculine end. Given the advances in feminism since that time, one would expect some change in this data. In 1992, a similar study by Delzel and Lapla reflected almost indicated that flute was feminine over 80% thought that trombone and drums were masculine. From this it is fairly safe to conclude that the stereotyping of instruments is still very much part of our culture (p. 3).

In our own dealings with music students and church orchestra members, similar traits as reported by Harrison above have been observed. The boys, who study the recorder as an applied instrument, do so largely because it is compulsory. However, when it comes to actual performance on stage, 95% of the boys do not show interest because they consider it a girls' instrument. In the church orchestra, girls who show interest in playing the trombone are viewed as attempting the absurd or even trespassing into boy's domain. Harrison (2001), posits: There is little doubt that girls and boys suffer as a result of the stereotyping of musical instruments. For example, the history of western music that is commonly taught includes very few references to women. There is still a long way to go in ensuring some kind of gender equity in our musical world. As Mead (1962) stated "any art is much richer when it is practiced by both sexes" (p. 3).

From the foregoing, it would require some guts for any male or female to major on an instrument normally ascribed to the opposite sex. There is actually no reason to feel odd because one play an instrument viewed by some as masculine or feminine as long as one plays it really well!

In the following grouping of orchestral instruments into soprano, alto, tenor and bass roles by Wagner, it would be observed that the trumpet and trombone which are viewed as men's instruments apparently because of their domineering acoustical character are assigned soprano and alto roles -parts normally sung by females in the choir. Orchestrators and composers certainly do not care which sex plays (he parts that they write for any instrument but are only interested in the proper performance thereof.

Soprano	Alto
Piccolo	Clarinet (1 st)
Flute	English horn
Oboe	Saxophone (alto)
Clarinet (E flat)	Trumpet (2 nd)
Saxophone	Horn (1 st and 2 nd)
Trumpet (1 st)	Trombone (1 st)
Violin (1 st)	violin (2 nd)

Tenor

Clarinet (2nd)
Clarinet (alto)
Saxophone (tenor)
Horn (2nd + 4th)
Trombone (2nd)
Viola

Bass

Bassoon
Contrabassoon
saxophone (baritone)
Trombone (bass)
Tuba
Cello
Bass
Wagner (1959).

The Way Forward

The music profession suffers as a result of needless gender stereotyping of some instruments. Steps need to be taken therefore to minimize and possibly eliminate it. There are problems of unbalanced

ensemble, loss of students with potentials, bullying among others.

In the first place the teacher should educate the students on the fact that no instrument was invented with a particular sex in mind.

Secondly, they (students) should be encouraged to-choose the instruments which they like instead of choosing the ones they do not like just because it is considered a man's or woman's instrument.

Those boys who shy away from some instruments to avoid being called "sissy" should also be made to understand that it is more "sissy" to deny yourself of what you love to do just because of what others think.

The girls should be made to see themselves as capable of playing those instruments traditionally associated with the opposite sex just the way girls now play football, a game which, until recently, was the exclusive preserve of boys and men.

Conclusion

To conclude this paper, we wish to state that in a class or ensemble deeply seeped in musical stereotypes, the teacher or leader should take care to remain gender sensitive until those affected are gradually weaned from their prejudices.

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