Introduction

This paper investigates some of the issues surrounding boys’ involvement in music and asks the question: Where are boys on the musical gender agenda? Current thinking in relation to gender and music appears to be almost entirely focussed on and driven by a feminist perspective. There is no denying the contribution of feminist thought to raising awareness of gender issues, nor is there any denial of the need for girls to be encouraged to engage in music of all styles and for the music of women to receive higher status in the musical canon. This paper critiques current thought on the topic and offers some alternative viewpoints. Recent literature in the field is reviewed and current fieldwork by the author is presented to arrive at a philosophical standpoint that includes elements of post-feminism. Fieldwork includes data on involvement in a range of musical endeavours and attempts to demonstrate that, in some situations, boys are disempowered and disadvantaged. Drawing on the work of Koza (1993), Gould (2003) and Adler (2001, 2003), the paper also includes practical suggestions on how to strive for a gender-just musical environment—a balanced environment in which women and men are considered equal.

Discovering the status quo

In approaching this topic, it was apparent that there was a large volume of literature in the area of gender research in music education. The work of Abeles and Porter (1978), Lamb (1990), Koza (1993, 1994), Green (1996), and Hanley (1998) provided a foundation for many researchers, including this author. On closer scrutiny, it was apparent
that recent thinking on the issue had centred on feminist thought.

GRIME (Gender Research in Music Education) is the name taken by an international organization devoted to research in music education involving gender issues. It is a special research interest group (SRIG) of MENC—the National Association for Music Education (USA). The research agenda for GRIME incorporates a range of areas for investigation, categorised into five broad areas:

1. Philosophical/theoretical research including critical, post-structural and post-modern theories of gender in music education
2. Historical research including the role of women
3. Classroom materials
4. Identity issues including how the profession of music education constructs gender expectations for males and females and what it means to be female in a discipline that greatly favours males
5. Sex equity issues including a continued monitoring of sex-stereotyping of instruments

In studying the detail of the GRIME research agenda, a bias towards the needs of women becomes evident, as well there should be—there is no denying the need for girls to be encouraged to engage in music of all styles and for the music of women to receive higher status in the musical canon. In this agenda and in practical application, the organisation does not welcome research into male issues, despite its title.

Adler (1999, 2001) and Harrison (2002, 2003) refute the notion that the discipline greatly favours or privileges males. There are some circumstances in which males are privileged and these probably exceed those in which females are privileged. Males are, however, greatly disempowered in many aspects of musical engagement. Adler (2001, 3) whose work focuses on participation in singing states:

The real problem is more than simply a question of a reduction in the number of singing males; in fact, the “missing males” issue is actually a symptom of a much
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greater problem—that of gender disadvantaging of males, which has been under-researched in music education (Koza, 1994; Svengalis, 1978). Many boys make a decision not to sing between elementary and secondary school, in response to psychological and sociological messages that singing is not an appropriate activity for males beyond a certain age. The greater reduction in the number of singing boys than that which occurs among girls is evidence that these influences are gender-based; at the very least, the greater reduction of singing boys may indicate that, as a gender, they may be more sensitive to anti-singing influences.

In real terms, these anti-singing influences can mean avoidance, but can also mean violence. There is clear evidence from the case studies conducted to support the notion that homophobic bullying as a result of participation in certain musical activities is present in schools. Certainly, Avoidance of femininity, male gender role rigidity and homophobic bullying continue to inhibit boys’ participation. The lack of tolerance of perceived difference has a lasting effect on the options boys have in music (Harrison 2002, 5).

The fieldwork supports this, as evidenced in this comment from one of the case studies:

Subject 1: All through most of my High School life I had to persevere with a lot of nasty comments and rumours from most of the mainstream students and for a while I was alienated purely because I enjoyed singing. My school wasn’t a place for young male singers (Harrison 2001, 33).

It is not just singers who are confronted by this regime. In an earlier research project the author examined tertiary students’ beliefs about masculine or feminine attributes of instruments. A continuum could be constructed from the instrument considered most feminine to the most masculine (see fig. 11.1. below).

< Insert Fig. 11.1 here >

It is apparent that there are degrees of masculinity and femininity based on instrument choice and perception. In
the same study, ensemble participation and engagement in specific styles of music were found to disadvantage some boys (see Harrison 2001, 2002, 2003).

When Gould, Chair of GRIME (2003) reflected that gender research can “help us envision an educational system in which we can all flourish” while suggesting that “worrying about the lack of men and boys who sing in our choirs—even as we privilege them” is a waste of time, the agenda became overt—boys were on the outer. It is apparent that the boys cited above are not privileged—they can be on the extreme margins. Evidence from Conway (2000, 13) supports the notion of females crossing gender lines more easily than males; a relatively common trait in mainstream gender studies but under researched in music. Her research touches on the issue of permission rather than talent preventing participation. In her findings she discovered that:

All of the students who were asked whether or not they would allow a daughter of theirs in 20 years to play a low brass instrument responded that the child should play whatever she would like. When asked that same question in regards to a son playing the flute, many of the students expressed concern about the teasing that child might experience.

If this is the case, then males in this instance are not in a privileged position. From an Australian perspective, Pickering and Repacholi (2001, 642) concluded that:

The perceived risk associated with playing, or even just circling, a gender-inappropriate instrument [on a survey] was probably much greater for the boys than for the girls. Boys in particular could benefit from exposure to multiple examples of a counter-stereotyped behaviour.

From gender studies to feminist studies

How is it possible that an organisation that claims to be responsible for promoting gender research has narrowed its focus to the exclusion of investigation regarding and authored by males? Reference to the work of Koza (1993), Lamb (2000), Gould (2003) provides some illumination.
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Gould (2003) makes this claim in relation to feminism. She states that:
Feminist theory is a social phenomenon and a philosophical approach that has been accepted slowly in the profession, and is consequently poorly understood. Problematic definitions associated with feminism have contributed to suspicion, hostility, and general disregard for the questions generated and findings reported by feminist theorists (Gould 2003, 1).

To assist in defining feminism, she proceeds by explaining that:
Feminism is commonly understood as the search for equality between women and men. Understanding feminism as gender equity, however, necessarily dismisses factors of race and class (not to mention sexuality, and bodily abled-ness, as well as scores of other variables), reflecting at the very least race and class bias. Feminism, then, is a political and philosophical project to end systems of domination (Gould 2003, 2).

Honourable though this definition is, there is little wonder that there is confusion about what feminists are attempting to achieve. The annexing of all “systems of domination” is admirable but not necessarily part of a strictly feminist agenda. Furthermore, the search for equality has resulted in the swinging of the pendulum too far in relation to some aspects of gender study. The problem for the male gender researcher in music is that there is no place under this umbrella for their pursuits. They have become the marginalized. Koza (1994, 61) spoke of the disregard for feminism as a legitimate movement in these terms:
When marginalized groups are brought to the table, they may not understand the rules or they may think the rules are irrelevant, they may want to change the rules that do not serve them well. They may ignore table talk and instead bring up subjects that are not to be discussed in polite company. They may say things that people don’t want to hear, upsetting and disturbing things, and sometimes they have no manners at all.

Ten years later, her words can now equally apply to the male gender researcher interested in issues of males’ involvement in music. Too often such researchers are
restricted by “gender in music” being almost synonymous “women in music.” This can exclude discussion of males’ roles as participants or researchers.

Towards a solution

Let there be no misunderstanding here. This mission is not driven by misogyny, patriarchy or chauvinism. It is recognised that “women in music,” “women and music” need to be addressed and constantly raised as vital issues in our research and practice. The issue is with the naming of this as gender research to the exclusion of other valuable work. To have this division within the ranks of gender research in music education helps us to envision nothing. The claim that boys are always privileged and girls are not lacks empirical proof. The place research of boys’ issues in music education is on the margins. As a result the growth of our discipline is hindered. In a positive sense, there are signs of change to be found in the work of Adler (2003) and Stynes, Currie and Carnegie (2003), which provides fine examples of research into boys’ education being put into action. Carnegie has investigated aspects of motivation and engagement of males and females. His recent work in the area of boys’ engagement in music in Sydney is a beginning towards collaboration in this field. Adler’s work in Canada in promoting boys’ singing in schools has begun the process in North America. These foundations are important steps in centring the gender pendulum, for the sake of students. In 2003, the author reflected that:

The management of gender issues in music education demands the attention of the musical community. Too few students are able to realise their full potential as a result of stereotyping and other societal forces. As an academic community, there is a responsibility to provide a strong philosophical background and informed leadership without restricting practices they may work in specific situations. As practicing music educators the challenge is to examine attitudes and beliefs of self and those of the students. Research and practice must interact to resolve these issues for the sake of boys and girls involved (or,
more importantly, not involved) in fully experiencing music (2003b, 7).

It is time to put aside these differences and to claim Gender Research in Music Education for what it is. A research agenda represents a broader view than the current leading thinkers are advocating is needed. The word “gender” needs to be reclaimed to represent a study of the involvement and roles of women and men in music.

References


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