



Book review: *Gender, subjectivity, and cultural work: the classical music profession*, by Christina Scharff

LUCY HOLLINGWORTH

The Scottish Journal of Performance
Volume 5, Issue 2; September 2018
ISSN: 2054-1953 (Print) / ISSN: 2054-1961 (Online)

Publication details: <http://www.scottishjournalofperformance.org>

To cite this article: Hollingworth, L., 2018. Book review: *Gender, subjectivity, and cultural work: the classical music profession*, by Christina Scharff. *Scottish Journal of Performance*, 5(2): pp.107–111.

To link to this article: <http://doi.org/10.14439/sjop.2018.0502.07>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> for details.

Book review: *Gender, subjectivity, and cultural work: the classical music profession*, by Christina Scharff

LUCY HOLLINGWORTH

DOI: 10.14439/sjop.2018.0502.07

Publication date: 30 September 2018

Gender, subjectivity, and cultural work: the classical music profession, by Christina Scharff. London: Routledge, 2018; ISBN: 9781138942561 (hbk) (£105), ISBN: 9781315673080 (ebk) (£35.99)

This book is an engaging and highly timely analysis of the situation for young women in the classical music profession. I was expecting quite a dry read but I was pleasantly mistaken. Scharff's text is filled with insights both large and small, and she draws on her research to challenge assumptions made by individuals and society more widely.

Through the use of quantitative analysis of datasets and qualitative analysis of interview data, Scharff examines how gender, race and class affect female musicians working in London and Berlin. She critiques inequality, the impact of neoliberal thinking, and the effect of precarious work as they reveal themselves through the interview data. The author also examines solutions and makes proposals for some ways forward in removing obstacles that effectively exclude some members of our society from engaging with cultural work.

The first chapter provides a solid context, based on wider research into cultural work, and explains the Foucauldian approach in which the entrepreneurial individual is understood as entrepreneurial in all aspects of the self, not

just in an economic sense. Scharff also draws on feminist research which identifies young women as entrepreneurial in the modern world, and therefore concludes that '[a]s cultural workers and young women, my research participants were twice positioned as entrepreneurial' (p.10). She explains how this group of young, female, classical musicians fits into the existing classical hierarchy and how she uses 'critical discursive psychology' (p.26) to find patterns in the interview data of her 64 interviewees.

In Chapter 2, Scharff examines a significant body of quantitative data which reveals the extent of the inequalities in terms of gender and race in members of orchestras and conservatoires in the UK and Germany. She is also interested in what the data does not reveal, such as the socio-economic backgrounds. She presents her analysis of the data in the context of societal obstacles; for example, networking—which disadvantages females, the working class and those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds—and the post-colonial approach to Western classical training in non-Western cultures. Family backgrounds also provide different experiences of consumption of classical music, which also tends to favour the white middle-classes. Mothering is another area of discussion; Scharff argues that this can easily be used as a distraction from the real issue of discrimination against females, and describes the difficulty that women have in presenting themselves as totally committed to a career whether or not they intend to have children.

The next three chapters look in more detail at the interview data, under the sub-headings of class, race and gender, entrepreneurialism, and precarious work. An important theme that emerges from these discussions is the issue of how neoliberal thinking creates a situation where 'gender inequalities were rendered unspeakable' (p.86). The postfeminist woman presents herself as empowered and

responsible for her own well-being and thus denies that there is any inequality impacting upon her career. Scharff also gives examples of the trivialisation of prejudicial behaviour and stereotyping—one interviewee stated ‘you just have to kind of be cool about it’ (p.101).

The culture of the entrepreneurial individual can lead to a position such that if the individual is not succeeding, then the reason would seem to lie in personal failure. This attitude conceals a far more complex picture; for example, perceptions of race and class can affect the access an individual has to the resources needed in order to become an entrepreneurial subject, and can reveal the real pattern of dependencies in the society which the entrepreneurial individual disavows.

Scharff describes the idea of the ‘the self as business’ (p.117) and the impact upon the use of time, physical and mental health (for example the hiding of injuries), the impact of competing with others and with oneself, and the tendency to blame those who are less successful as being responsible for their own failures.

The precarious nature of cultural work and its impact on the ability to plan for the future and to survive financially from month to month is another important theme discussed here. Interviewees manage dire insecurity without feeling able to discuss it with others for fear of admitting difficulty. Some have a financially supportive family to fall back on if necessary, again raising the issue of class as a factor in the accessibility of this type of career. The financial instability and the lack of benefits such as pensions and holidays are balanced against the freedom of being a freelancer and of doing ‘the best job in the world’ (p.158); the experience of ‘being in the zone’ (p.161) and the special experience of sharing music with an audience.

The cultural life and differences between the two cities, London and Berlin, form the final analytical chapter. Of particular interest here is the discussion around how the success of these 'creative cities' (p.172) has led to gentrification and an increase in living costs, which is now threatening the very creative industries that have made the cities centres of culture.

In her concluding chapter, Scharff discusses ways to address some of the issues she has identified; fair pay, insurance schemes for precarious workers, and urban policies protecting creative communities are examples. Maintaining accurate demographic data in order to understand exclusions on racial and gender grounds and a wider debate about exclusion are also suggested. Scharff also recommends 'structural solutions to structural issues' (p.200) and includes here the success of blind auditioning, the use of quotas, and of mentoring and professional development for under-represented groups.

This is a powerful and clearly argued book which touches on issues close to my own experiences as a female classical music composer. It shines a light on unspoken issues and looks at the wider picture of the kind of society we live in and how it affects the female cultural worker. It challenges many contemporary values and suggests that there are political as well as individual issues that need to be addressed. Anyone working in the creative industries, from performers right through to those engaged in forming policy, will find something useful in this book, as will those interested in the social sciences.

About the review author

LUCY HOLLINGWORTH is a composer, musicologist and writer currently studying for a PhD at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. She has a Master's degree in Composition from Edinburgh University. Her research area is autoethnography and women composers and she

is preparing a creative portfolio and a dissertation. Recent performances include, *Out of the Snowstorm, an Owl* performed by the Brodick Quartet, *What The Living Do* performed by Sinae Lee, and a music theatre piece, *The Poetess*, premiered by students at RCS in 2016. She previously worked as an IT lecturer and web designer and is the Web Editor of the *Scottish Journal of Performance*.