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Reflecting on the Work of Gender Relations in New Music

Institutional Critique and Activist Strategies

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Title

Reflecting on the work of Gender Relations in New Music: Institutional Critique and Activist Strategies

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Abstract

This chapter gives an overview of key actions by the activist group Gender Relations in New Music, which advocates for increased gender equality and intersectional diversification in contemporary classical music (CCM). The group's activities have included creating statistics, organizing events, protest actions, and connecting interested people in this still disparate area of CCM. Through a retrospective analysis of these actions collectively, the article argues that strategies of relationality and coalition-building have made GRiNM's critiques of CCM institutions unique, and have gradually both adapted themselves and informed the evolving discourse around the diversification of contemporary music.

Keywords

New music, Contemporary classical music (CCM), institutional critique, gender and diversity, intersectional feminism, activist strategies, music festivals, Germany, Switzerland

Text

Gender Relations in New Music (GRiNM) is a heterogeneous collective advocating for increased gender equality, inclusivity, and further diversification of people and practices in

the new music community.¹ Since its foundation it has been a priority to include queer, LGBTQ+, and intersectional perspectives in our work and in relation to our concept of gender. Active mainly in Germany but also across Europe, GRiNM has generated statistics about gender representation at new music festivals, organized workshops and talks at various international festivals and conferences, used artistic interventions and protest tactics, exercised critique through digital social media platforms, and in November 2019 organized its own international conference on gender and diversity issues in new music. The group's approach across all these activities is to create space for these issues, connect practitioners interested in change from across the music ecosystem, and apply pressure to those who defend the status quo.

This article will give an overview of the group's actions and explain some of the strategies behind them. We argue that GRiNM's method of critiquing new music and its institutions is unique in its focus on building coalitions of people, rather than establishing yet another institution to achieve its goals. We want to emphasize however that this is just one interpretation by two members of GRiNM of complex and multifaceted actions worked on by many people, and that different interpretations are as welcome as they are probable.

Before delving into details, it is important to say that we view contemporary classical music (CCM) as inextricably linked to classical music, as a 'high art subculture' (Emerson 2020) that is dependent on much of the same training and institutions as classical music, such as conservatories. Though the genre understands itself as being about breaking traditions rather than continuing them like classical music, Anna Bull has argued convincingly that CCM has

¹ We will use the terms 'new music' and 'contemporary classical music' (CCM) interchangeably here, drawing attention to the terms' current instability as well as their relative prevalence in the German and UK contexts respectively.

inherited classical music's problematic class and gender biases (2019, 14), something we have also seen first-hand in our own activism. This means new music's understanding of its own 'newness' is understood as a succession of works by individual geniuses, like its classical music parent. Focusing too much on music as the creation of one singular individual comes at the cost of thinking about it as the product of a specific set of social, historical, institutional, even technological circumstances. Because these conditions have been ignored while universalizing its appeal and accessibility, CCM has ignored the fact that it strongly favours the music of white, Western, bourgeois male subjects.

GRiNM's earliest actions thus focused on producing statistics that challenged these universalist claims. Its first action (as Gender Research in Darmstadt, GRiD) was to 'digest' the statistics produced by Ashley Fure about the Darmstadt Summer Course in 2016, which showed that since its founding until 2014, only 7% of compositions performed were by female composers. The statistics unleashed a fury of informal meetings and debates among the course's students, leading to guerrilla protest interventions, and to the formation of the group that would later come to be known as GRiNM.

After that summer course, GRiNM went on to organize several more actions to generate statistics on gender representation at CCM festivals in Germany. We for instance found that at the MaerzMusik festival, from 2010 to 2018, just 28% of pieces were by women,² trans-masculine or non-binary people, while at the Donaueschingen Musiktage between 2011 and 2017 it was only 18% (Gender Relations in New Music 2020a). GRiNM also continued to use guerrilla actions to get these messages across: At the Donaueschingen Musiktage for

² This work is based on intersectional feminism, and as part of that, references to women include "all those who travel under the sign women" (Ahmed 2017, 14).

instance, the statistics we generated were presented as an advertisement in the festival program (see image 1) as well as on flyers and stickers we handed out at the festival. Doing these actions led to us engaging in informal discussions with organizers and festival goers about why this was important.

GRiNM produced these statistics through crowdsourcing them via ‘data-harvesting workshops’ appended to various festivals, where attendees would be invited to sit together with their laptops and go through physical or digital festival archives, entering the statistics on a shared Google Sheet. The significance of these statistics is twofold. First, while these findings do not come as a surprise to any experienced observer, they serve the purpose of making the very blatant inequalities in this field visible and sayable. They provide quantifiable evidence that can be used in discussion and to further activist goals (see also Scharff 2018, 42).

Second, the crowdsourcing activities, as well as the initial GRiD debates spurred by Fure’s statistics, functioned to connect like-minded people together who were interested in this topic. The data-harvesting activities gave a straightforward, informal, monotonous goal that led to people chatting and getting to know each other. We found this particularly effective because many participants were interested in these topics, but felt unqualified to discuss them. Inevitable questions of categorization like assuming gender based on names, or how to deal with composer/performers or other non-standard categories led to equally productive discussions about the challenges of categorization, and the nuance and complexity associated with achieving equal representation in real-world conditions.

GRiNM grew and began to expand the kind of events it participated in beyond the festivals in Germany, who until then had invited us to take part in their program, with members leading workshops and talks at various international symposiums, conferences and festivals in Europe. The aim was to create a dedicated space for presenting and discussing these important issues around gender and diversity and allowing a broad range of practitioners, from academics to musicians, to speak and exchange on these issues. We found that these sessions resonated deeply with those attending and in each context there was a tangible need to speak about these issues. Through this, GRiNM's collective knowledge, first developed through moments of activism and generating statistics, became part of academic discourse, with different members connecting their own research to the experiences and knowledges of the group, enriching and broadening the scope of the network. While at these events certain individuals would represent GRiNM, the collective nature of the group was always emphasised in event programs. As will become apparent later, the possibility to act under an anonymous collective name is also a crucial function of GRiNM.

As the group's activities continued, its network of artists, researchers, organizers, educators and academics gradually expanded. This developed the important role which GRiNM serves as a network of like-minded individuals crossing over national borders and fields of practice. The aim is to connect people together who are working on different aspects of these issues, in various settings and with different approaches. However, since these issues are systemic, it is important to acknowledge how different parts interconnect and influence each other, forming the CCM music world which we know and engage with.

Marking two years since GRiNM's inception, the group returned to Darmstadt in 2018.

Running parallel to the Summer Courses was a conference entitled *Defragmentation* -

Convention on Curating Contemporary Music, held partly in response to the actions by GRiD in 2016. In our view, it did not go far enough in addressing the issues which we see as ingrained in CCM and the decision to hold the conference at a location separate to that of the Summer Courses reinforced the idea that these difficult discussions were taking place without practitioners from the field, who themselves must be part of any meaningful change.

Following the opening speech, members of GRiNM stood up and read in unison a statement criticising it as tokenistic and merely paying lip service to this slew of crucial issues. We invited delegates to join the group in a “parainstitutional” discussion space in the form of a temporary marquee set up in the front yard of the school building where the Summer Courses take place. Over the next week GRiNM held a series of open discussions in the marquee on various topics with participants from both the Summer Courses (students and teachers) and the conference, creating ourselves a necessary “off” or “para” space, which we thought was necessary in order to have meaningful discussions on these issues as well as crossing the divide between discourse and practice.

GRiNM also engaged in other forms of creative activism at Darmstadt. We began an instagram account where we would post memes that were both making fun and being critical of the Darmstadt Summer Courses (see image 2 and 3). We would tag these with official hashtags, thus inserting ourselves into the online presence of the Summer Courses and conference. It also provided a way for those not attending in person, but part of the CCM world and aware of the role Darmstadt plays in it, to engage with and follow what GRiNM was doing there. We also performed interventions, raining down flyers (see image 4) onto the audience at the end of the premier of Lisa Lim’s opera ‘Atlas of the Sky’, provoking thoughts around what the Darmstadt Summer Courses are and more interestingly, what they could be.

GRiNM paid for these various actions by using the speakers fees which two members of the group received for running a workshop at the Defragmentation conference. This exemplifies the position which GRiNM often has in relation to these big festivals; invited yet not fully included to be part of fundamental discussions around what is necessary or possible for such an event. We often have intimate insider knowledge of these events through our members and network, yet through acting collectively as GRiNM we are able to engage both as individuals (composers, academics, etc) and as a group. As GRiNM it is possible to exercise a critical position that would be a challenging undertaking for any individual, as well as potentially having a negative effect on their career. The collective voice of GRiNM is one of its strengths, and the open structure of the group allows for people to become involved or join an action for a short period of time, as well as to do their own actions under this moniker.

Rather than continuing to be invited as a pressure release valve for festivals who felt obligated to discuss their lack of diversity, GRiNM decided to initiate its own event. In November 2019, the group organized the *GRiNM Network Conference 2019: Experiences with Gender and Diversity in New Music* in Zurich. The idea was to bring together a wide range of people working in the fields of research, education, programming, and administration, to share their experiences on the topic from different perspectives. The resulting conference thus activated the network that GRiNM had been gradually growing, bringing them together as a peer group, and thus demonstrating that the issues that GRiNM had been advocating for were important for the larger CCM community to take seriously. We extended this gesture also via a special issue of *OnCurating Journal* that included the academic papers and reports from the field presented at the conference, solidifying the existence and importance of these positions within the growing debate in CCM and sharing them with an audience beyond those who attended the conference.

During 2020 and 2021 GRiNM turned to mostly text-based interventions, due to the pandemic sweeping the world and dramatically impacting the performing arts and our own careers. At the beginning of 2020 we began a collaboration with the new music magazine *Positionen*, where over four issues GRiNM directly addressed its readership through a series of full-page spreads. We returned to working with statistics, taking a playful approach, calling the series *Checking Boxes with GRiNM*. ‘Chapter 1: Composition Professors’, focused on the gender of those holding professorship positions (not teaching contracts or lectureships) at major universities and music schools in German speaking Europe (Germany, Austria, Switzerland). For this we adopted a tick the box approach which had three options, taken from what has now become standard for all job advertisements in German: Male (M), Female (F), Divers (D). This highlighted the fact that the vast majority of professors were male. ‘Chapter 2: Curators of some New Music Festivals’ in the next edition left the boxes unchecked as an open invitation to readers to tick the boxes themselves, and as a gesture back towards our desire to crowdsource statistics as itself a form of activism. Here we included more categories such as class/socio-economic background and race/ethnicity/migratory background.³ We wanted to move away from solely gender-based categorisation and make visible the many ways in which discrimination appears. This is based on our intersectional approach which is core to our understanding of these issues. ‘Chapter 3: Selected Juries’ looked at the people making the decisions about composition awards and prizes. In our final letter to readers, ‘Out of the Box with GRiNM’, we wrote about the limitations of statistics in understanding the complexity of privileges and exclusions which exist, but also their necessity in illuminating the reality of institutions and power structures in the European new

³ “Migratory background” is used here as the English translation of the German *Migrationshintergrund*.

music scene. It was an invitation to reflect critically, and a demand to develop solutions and enact change.⁴

In September 2020 GRiNM was invited to be part of a symposium by the Creative Europe project *Sounds Now* entitled ‘Curating Diversity in Europe - Decolonizing Contemporary Music.’ We decided to contribute to the symposium by publishing an online questionnaire in advance of the event. As we explain at the beginning of the document,

A danger of symposia on such fundamental issues is to spend too much time establishing definitions and problems. Our goal is rather to jumpstart this process so that we can spend more time committing to meaningful exchange and enacting prompt, lasting, and tangible changes. (Gender Relations in New Music 2020b)

The action tried to highlight the danger of ‘diversity talk’ becoming an ends in itself among those concerned about a lack of diversity in new music. Responses to the survey confirmed this danger, while also revealing a high amount of what Ahmed (2004) has called ‘declarations of whiteness’, suggesting complicated dynamics in the group that could have been further explored during the event.

In 2021 GRiNM united with *Archiv Frau und Musik* and the female:pressure network in a spontaneous protest action against the all white male event *Einklang freier Wesen* at the ZKM Karlsruhe. Open letters were written to the organisers and pressure was applied online through social media posts and memes on the GRiNM instagram account. This resulted in the postponement of the event and a new program, as well as us being invited to a discussion to address these issues. This exemplifies how the (evermore online) network we have built over

⁴ The interventions appeared in the German magazine *Positionen: Texte zur aktuellen Musik* (tr. Positions: Texts on contemporary music) between issues 123 and 126.

time can effect change. Regarding these various text-based interventions it is important to consider the form and language, which depend on both the context and intended audience.

The importance of addressing gender and diversity has become increasingly acknowledged in new music, which has led to an increase in the number of large and small organizations focusing on them. While many concentrate on discrete projects or goals, what we think still sets GRiNM's approach apart is our process of becoming-together, calling out, and exerting various forms of pressure in situations where gender and diversity concerns are not being taken seriously enough. Because much communication in our field is either processed via PR people, or otherwise happens in small late-night conversations at the bar, we believe there is a power in speaking out plainly and publicly about the realities of the field, not least because neither education in conservatories, nor festivals or venues make space for any sort of critical questioning.

In this article we have given an overview of some of GRiNM's actions and explained how they relate to our larger activist goal. While certain mainstays like statistics and texts reoccur across our actions, we always try to consider what actions would produce the intended effect and best achieve our goals in a particular setting. Additionally, the networks and personal relationships we build provide access to a pool of information and resources that we can work with to realize our intended effects. In this way, the group is not a funded organisation which works to fulfil quotas or cultural policy, but takes a more fluid form, a collective voice that dares to speak and act on issues we consider crucial and relevant. Its most fundamental activism is thus its continued existence, which provides a banner that can be made useful by all activists in new music to help achieve their goals.

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Biographies 50-100 words

Brandon Farnsworth works as an independent music curator based in Berlin, and as a research associate at the Zurich University of the Arts, where he also studied classical music performance and transdisciplinary studies. In 2020 he completed his doctoral degree in historical musicology at the University of Music Carl Maria von Weber Dresden with the publication *Curating Contemporary Music Festivals: A new Perspective on Music's*

Mediation (available via transcript Verlag). He has done projects with several music festivals including Ultima Festival Oslo, Montreal New Musics Festival, and Sonic Matter Zurich.

Rosanna Lovell is a musician, educator, performer, radio maker and sound artist based in Berlin. Her practice focuses on feminist and postcolonial perspectives in classical and new music which she explores through performance, intervention, sound and research, as well as critical and self-reflexive approaches in the arts and arts education. She studied classical music performance and languages at the University of Adelaide (Australia) and in 2018 completed a Master of Arts at the Institute for Art in Context, UdK/Berlin University of the Arts, where she is also part of the feminist collective FEM*_MUSIC*_ .