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## **GENDER PERFORMANCE IN A FINNISH DANCE RESTAURANT: REFLECTIONS ON A MULTICULTURAL FIELDWORK EXPERIMENT**

The article contributes to reflexive ethnomusicology, gender studies of music, and performance studies. It is a report of a fieldwork experiment, which set out to study gender performance in a Finnish dance restaurant. The particular aim of the fieldwork was to examine the impact of scholars' gender identities and previous experiences on the observations made in the field. The experiment was made by ten members of the Music and Gender Study Group of the International Council for Traditional Music, in 1999.

The analysis reveals how past experiences and histories as well as the current identity factors — such as age, ethnicity, race, world view and feminism — affected each of the visitors' observations and how they negotiated their gender in the dance restaurant. The article concludes that while performing ourselves, we construct multiple performance events. That is how we imaginatively create the world and its events. In this process, the boundaries between insiders and outsiders are blurred: we relate to the events through our identities and past experiences and create our own, different readings of an event.

Keywords: gender, performance, music, dance

Positioning a scholar's relations to the subject of enquiry has been actively discussed for a couple of decades. Feminist methodologies, particularly, have challenged us to acknowledge the political and subjective nature of all kinds of research (c.f. Abu-Lughod 1990). The ideology of objective research has given way to the demand for explicit positioning and self-reflection. The point of departure is that every choice made by the scholar, her/his theoretical background, methodological tool and resources of interpretation convey ideological and other cultural constructions. The scholar him/herself is also a part of the research; another scholar working with the same research material could easily arrive at different interpretations and research results.

In fieldwork based research, the intertwining of the research and the researcher is particularly obvious. Fieldwork material is collected at a certain time and in certain sociocultural situations in interaction with certain people. It would be hard to find a researcher who could maintain an objective distance from the subject of enquiry.

The demand of reflexivity has also been of interest to ethnomusicologists. On the one hand, the question has been who has the right to represent "others", on the other hand, the idea of objectivity has been challenged. Reflexive ethnomusicology is keenly aware of the significance of experience and personal contexts in the fieldwork and in the writing of ethnography (see, for example, Cooley 1997:16-18). In addition, the various roles, identities and reflexive experiences which arise during fieldwork are also examined as agents of the research (see Barz & Cooley 1997).

Gender is one of the identities which are negotiated and discussed in the fieldwork process.<sup>1</sup> This article is a report of a fieldwork experiment, the aim of which was not only to analyse gender performance in a Finnish dance restaurant, but also to examine the impact of scholars' identities and previous experiences on the observations made during the course of the fieldwork.

Ten members of the Music and Gender Study Group of the International Council for Traditional Music took part in the experiment.<sup>2</sup> In connection with a study group meeting in January 1999 they all visited a dance restaurant: *Vanha Maestro*, in Helsinki. The ten members who participated in this experiment all happened to be female. The male participants at the meeting either did not come to the restaurant or had already left Finland by the time the observations were discussed and recorded. Those of us who took part in this experiment came from Croatia, Finland, Poland, Sweden, and the United States, and our ages and academic positions ranged from a Ph.D. student in her early thirties to a senior full

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, this subject has been discussed in ethnomusicology in the anthology *Music and Gender* (Moisala & Diamond 2000), which includes a self-reflexive "conversation" between the authors discussing the gendered experiences relating to their work.

<sup>2</sup> The Music and Gender Study Group of the ICTM consists of nearly one hundred scholars interested in the gender aspects and view of music. This study group was initiated at the ICTM conference in Helsinki in 1985, and in 1987 the group was accepted as the official study group of the ICTM. The first formal meeting was organized in Heidelberg in 1988. Since then, meetings have been arranged frequently, and three publications have been produced (Herndon & Ziegler 1990, 1991; Moisala & Diamond 2000). The members of the group do not share the same political stances to gender studies of music; some of them study music from the point of view of feminist theories or concentrate on studying women in music, others examine gender systems in music cultures from perspectives provided by non-feminist or gay and lesbian theories. Approximately one third of the members of the study group are male. I am indebted to the participation of my colleagues in this experiment and their permission to use the recorded observations for this analysis.

professor approaching her retirement. One of us was Asian-American, the rest white Europeans and Americans.

The participants were encouraged to observe the gender performance, including their own, in a Finnish dance restaurant.<sup>3</sup> Self-reflection was planned to have an important role in the observations. We prepared ourselves for the fieldwork by rehearsing the basic steps of the most common dances played in Finnish restaurants: the Finnish tango, *jenkka*, foxtrot, and waltzes, because the intention was also to exercise participant observation.

### **Gender performativity in performance**

According to an ethnomusicological paradigm, musical events are encapsulations of cultural patterns and values (c.f. McLeod & Herndon 1980). This type of research is connected with the inter-disciplinary area of performance studies. Within ethnomusicology, performance studies consisted, for a long time, of studies of musical events: music and dance which were performed were examined within the context of musical events. The point of departure for those studies was that the so-called "extra-musical" cannot be separated from the musical: what is in the context is also in music, and within music various cultural performances take place. In John Blacking's (1983:47) words, musical performance epitomises the transitory reality of culture. Blacking was among the first ethnomusicologists to state that culture exists only insofar as it is performed by people.

In more recent decades, performance studies have emphasised the performative nature of musical performance. Research has focused on studying which other cultural elements (such as ideologies, cultural conventions and values) apart from the music, dance and lyrics are "performed" at a performance. In the words of Beverley Diamond, through musical performance, in which something (music, dance, etc.) is presented, many other things, such as a gender system, become accomplished.<sup>4</sup> This

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<sup>3</sup> The advice for the fieldwork was short: make (and write down) concrete observations about interaction between women and men, and also observe your own gendered behaviour. How do men/women, musicians and customers, behave and dance? How do they behave with people of the same and different sex? How is the behaviour of musicians gendered? Who has power? How is power negotiated between genders? Also observe behaviour which crosses gender conventions. How is your own gender performed in the situation? Observe how it affects the situation and the observations you make.

<sup>4</sup> This clarification was originally articulated by Beverley Diamond at York University, Toronto (Autumn 1997). In Judith Butler's words, "performance as bounded 'act' is distinguished from performativity insofar as the latter consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer" (1993:234).

new ethnography<sup>5</sup> emphasises the way in which meanings and interpretations are constructed through experiences and interaction between participants, all of whom have various changing identities and roles. Power is negotiated and moves between these participants. The ethnographic narration evolves from these situational experiences. In the narration, the voice of the researcher should be located and presented in the narrow field of "healthy" reflexivity, but avoiding overt confession.

Postmodern performance studies, in my opinion, are closely related to the theories of performativity introduced by the feminist scholar Judith Butler (1990 and 1997). According to her, gender, like other cultural categories such as ethnicity and sexuality, is performed differently in different situations and locations. Gender categories, such as "man" and "woman" are representations which are constructed within cultural institutions. They are not biologically given, but cultural constructions. Gender performance, like the performance of other cultural categories, takes place as a negotiation between context-bound and situational subjects. The gender system of the culture, power relations included, and personal experiences are involved in the gender negotiation.

For Butler (1993:234), gender is not a given, a conventional woman or a man, but performed and negotiated. According to her, performance as an event (such as a staged performance) has to be separated from performativity in the sense that performativities consist of norms which precede and guide the performance and the performers. Power always plays an important part in gender performance, which is not free from the gender system surrounding it, even though it may contest, mask, or oppose conventional gender roles. Therefore, gender performance should be understood as a negotiation between an individual and his or her cultural surroundings.

Laurence Senelick (1992) argues that staged performance allows the performer to move in and out of conventional gender roles. Gender roles performed by "performers" never merely replicate those in everyday life; "they are more sharply defined and more emphatically presented — offering both an ideal and a critique" (1992:xi). However, the power of music to create a space for a more free gender performance is not restricted only to staged performances (see Moisala 2000). Music is a specific part of expressive culture; it marks time, place and space differently than other spheres of culture. Music suspends the "here and now" by creating a special out-of-the-ordinary context and possibly, therefore, it is often so that musical performances allow different gendered and sexual or erotic performances. Music and related gender performances are also subject to social control and restriction. Therefore, musical events are fruitful sites for the study of the dynamism between

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<sup>5</sup> Michelle Kisliuk (1998:11-14) in her study of music made by baAka presented different sides of the postmodern performance ethnography in multiple ways.

socially controlled, culture-bound gender systems and individual gender performance.

Our experiment set out to determine how gender is negotiated in a Finnish dance restaurant and pays particular attention to the following questions: What factors are at play when negotiating gender in a Finnish dance restaurant? How is gender<sup>6</sup> performed and which factors influence gender negotiation? Is gender performance in the dance restaurant formed by the Finnish gender system? In which ways do the background factors of the scholar, her gender, ethnicity, education and so on guide the observations she makes? Finally, in which ways does the theory of performativity and positioning of the scholar enrich the tradition of performance studies within ethnomusicology?

### **An evening at *Vanha Maestro***

*Vanha Maestro* belongs to the oldest and most well-known dance restaurants in Helsinki. Customers come there to find either short or long-term company, to spend an evening with companions or simply to dance, often also with their own partner or spouse. Food is not served in the restaurant; it is only for dancing, socialising and drinking.

The restaurant setting of *Vanha Maestro*, as well as music performed in it, are typical of Finnish dance restaurants. The whole setting emphasises that the primary purpose of the restaurant is to provide a dance venue but, in addition, it provides the possibility for looking for a partner. On the evening of our experiment, an all-male orchestra was placed on the stage next to the dance floor surrounded by tables. Behind a couple of rows of tables there is a bar on a higher floor level, which provides men sitting there a good view over the tables below and across to the dance floor. The dominating colour in the restaurant is purple and lights are dimmed to provide a sensual atmosphere. The tables are covered with white cloths and the waitresses are dressed in black and white. The dance floor is well lit, but in a manner which creates an atmosphere of intimacy. Big light boards, which indicate when men and/or women may invite partners to dance, are hanging on a wall.

Elina Haavio-Mannila & Raija Snicker, who had earlier studied daytime dances at *Vanha Maestro*, described its internal decoration as "festively ascetic" (1980:82) — it was still so today, a couple of decades later. People were dressed up for the evening and the dance floor was always full when the orchestra was playing. Many customers stayed by the rail on the upper floor, following intently the events on the dance floor.

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<sup>6</sup> The history of feminist theory includes various stances on the interrelatedness of (biological) sex and (social) gender (see, for instance, Nicholson 1997). In this context, gender refers to social gender identity, which the subject takes on, performs and/or which is ascribed to him or her in a specific situation.

We saw plenty of women in dated, glittering, provocative clothing: dresses and high heels and plenty of make-up. The men wore white shirts and jackets. Everyone was wearing dancing shoes. In the ladies' room, women discussed and helped with each other's make-up and hairstyles, and commented upon the quality of the evening's men.

The dress code was socially controlled. A woman belonging to our group, who was wearing regular walking shoes, was asked by a stranger pointing at her shoes, if she was really hoping to dance. Another of us, who was dressed in a scholarly "gender-neutral" style was looked at by both women and men to such an extent that she hardly dared to walk through the hall. A woman without make-up was stared at with astonishment. The dress code of the men was even stricter; we saw no-one deviating from what was expected.

It turned out that this kind of dance restaurant setting was familiar to everyone in our group of observers. With the exception to the youngest Finnish observer, who had seen these kinds of events only on TV, we all had our own previous experiences of dance restaurants — however, from different cultures and at different times. A participant's familiarity with this situation depended, first of all, on the frequency of her past experiences of dance restaurants and of dancing as a physical activity. National background did not seem to play such an essential role: the Finnish participants who were not familiar with dance restaurants and culture experienced a greater sense of outsidership in this environment than the actual "foreigners" who had memories of dance restaurants.

Most of the customers were in late middle-age. People below thirty and above sixty were exceptions. According to my experience, they were from the upper working class and lower middle class. This observation is also supported by previous sociological studies made by Haavio-Mannila & Snicker (1980:114). Approximately 95% or more of the customers were Finns, among them some Swedish tourists and people belonging to other Finnish ethnic groups, Romanies, Blacks and Arabs.

The music played in the restaurant originates from the late 1950s and early 1960s: tangos,<sup>7</sup> *jenkkas*, polkas, waltzes and schlagers from the time when these people were young. This kind of music spread a sense of nostalgia over the event. The music played in the restaurant had, according to the foreign guests, "an exotic Finnish flavour" which they could only define as the slower tempo and simpler rhythmic structure than was customary in their own cultures.

The musical band, which consisted of only male musicians, seemed to be there only to provide live music for the dance: they paid more

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<sup>7</sup> The Argentinean tango travelled to Finland via Germany in the early decades of 20th century and, nowadays, it is hard to see any relations between these two tango styles. In Finland, this kind of dated dance music is most popular amongst the middle-aged and older people.

attention to their instruments and technical equipment than to the customers. Even though the singer was one of the best-known tango singers in Finland, the dancers and audience hardly looked at him. The singer, Eino Grön, did not put himself forward in any way, only rarely seeking eye contact with the dancers. The centre of the event was the dance floor. Many dancing couples acted as if they were on stage: they danced self-consciously aware that they were being watched. The music made by the singer and band created an auditive space for the dance and an atmosphere of romance and love which provides inspiration and structure in the search for partners.

### **Performing gender in the restaurant**

At first glance, gender roles and power attached to them seemed to be obvious and clearly settled. The men were the ones who took the initiative and had the power. They gazed and walked among the women and selected their partners. On the dance floor, they lead the dance. It was men who stood by the rail, monitoring the dance floor. For most of the evening, the signs on the wall indicated that both men and women could invite a partner to the dance floor. Nevertheless, women who took the initiative were rare. The women's role was to be gazed upon. They waited, adjusted and followed. The ruling norm at the restaurant seemed to follow the traditional Western gender order: men having power and initiative and women being the objects of men's initiatives.

The conventional gender roles were, however, only the mainstream behavioural pattern. As expected, on closer examination, we found a variety of different male and female performative styles of negotiating power. There were many men who did not actively invite women to dance nor did they monitor the women. And there were women wearing trousers and women who took the initiative to ask men to dance. One could find several performative gender patterns on the dance floor: men whose body language was exaggeratedly masculine, who almost imprisoned the women they danced with, whereas other men allowed their partners space and freedom. Some of them could even ask the dance partner to lead the dance if they found themselves unable to do so. The gestures and movements of the dancers varied from women who stressed their femininity and men exaggerating their masculinity to men and women who moved in a gender-neutral way.

One and the same person could perform different gendered styles in different situations: particularly when the socialising among same-sex groups was compared with mixed sex groups. The equal power relations within all male groups changed when an individual man entered female company. The man exhibited protective behaviour, whereas women began to emphasise their femininity immediately when a man entered their

company. There was a consistent awareness of being "on the stage" of pretend and play, formed for adventure.

The gender order dominating at *Vanha Maestro* can hardly be called that of the present-day Finnish gender system, or even a caricature of it. According to my interpretation, it relates closely to the dance music originating in the 1950s and 60s. The music conveys the gender system of those decades. The restaurant and its music provided the customers with the possibility to make a nostalgic visit to their youth and to the gender order which prevailed in the 1950s and 60s. In my opinion, the dance evening at *Vanha Maestro* provides evidence for the claim that music creates a specific time and place, allowing exceptional gender performances (see Moisala 2000:3).

### **Couple dance as gender negotiation**

The conventional knowledge of Western gender roles is coded in couple dances,<sup>8</sup> where the woman is supposed to follow the movements of the man. The dance position in these kinds of dances limits woman's movements allowing the man to define the space, the direction and speed of the movement. This gendered knowledge about the man's movements and the woman's responses is coded into the dance. The man also guides the woman he has chosen to and from the dance floor and "protects" her, on the floor, from the movements of other dancing couples.

However, the couple dance itself, in which these gender roles are performed, is about partnership and co-operation: dancing partners have to know how to behave and move, otherwise the dance does not work. It is an exceptional combination of personal distance and bodily intimacy. Couples who do not necessarily know each other and who might not even look into each other's eyes, hold each other with apparent physical intimacy and move as a unit, sensing each other's movements and enjoying the physicality of good dancing. Thus, couple dance is not only an icon of man's power, but also a sign of a gender contract and co-operation.

In the couple dance, power and gender roles can also be negotiated differently, for instance, a more skilful female dancer can take the lead. Thus, power relates to the dancing skill. In *Vanha Maestro*, skilful men and women were popular dancing partners. Dancing skill gave them the power to choose their partners, as well as giving them power on the dance floor.

### **The "genderless" scholar on the dance floor**

In the discussions following the dance event, it became obvious that past experiences and histories as well as the current identity factors — such as

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<sup>8</sup> See, among others, Hanna 1988.



age, ethnicity, race, world-view and feminism — affected each of the visitors' observations and the way how they negotiated their gender in the dance restaurant. The older participants who had gone to similar kinds of dances in their youth perceived the situation as a desirable opportunity for communication between the sexes and as a positive performance of masculinity and femininity. The Asian-American observed aspects addressing race and ethnicity, and a student studying disabled people competitive dancing made observations about how her own disability was perceived by other customers.

The theoretical stances taken by the observers significantly affected the observations made. The feminists amongst us noticed the inequality of power between the sexes, whereas the non-feminists did not make observations concerning the division of power. Scholars accepting the theories of gender performativity were more sensitive to the variations in gender performance than those whose observations were guided by theories originating within the first movement of women's studies, who tended to look for the roles of women versus men. The researchers' observations also reflected the amount of fieldwork experience, particularly the ability simultaneously to distance themselves from, and to participate in the event. Fieldwork experience allowed some researchers to observe the situation, including their own gender performance, from a theoretical point of view, whereas the lack of experience made observations more ego-centric.

Adopting a scholarly role enabled some individuals to distance themselves from the situation, to play "the fly on the wall". Some non-Finns found that their foreign status provided a similar kind of shelter. Despite these attempts at distancing, the restaurant with its "staged" gender roles made us aware of our own gender performance. The stressed gender codes of the situation forced us to re-identify our own gendered selves. Nevertheless, we all reacted to the situation as women who are socialised into the Western dance culture: we waited for an invitation to dance and felt disappointed and discouraged if we were not asked. A dance invitation means acceptance as a "woman". One feminist in the group was afraid that her feminism would show and reduce her chances of an invitation to dance. Many of us did not even dare to look at the men.

The youngest researcher received the most dance invitations. She also felt she was one of the few women who had the power and courage to take the initiative to ask men to dance. When she asked a man to dance, she felt, in her own words, that she "helped the poor guy out". This demonstrates how power does not simply always lie in men's hands, but, instead, can be negotiated anew.

In addition, the observers' gender experiences demonstrate how gender relates to various other identity categories, such as age, ethnicity, previous mental and bodily experiences, sexual orientation, looks, as well as with educational, social and cultural backgrounds. Every researcher

sought out familiar aspects to categorise her observations and for identification. Our observations of a musical event arise from our own gendered identity which we negotiate anew in different situations.

Despite strong Finnish characteristics, the *Vanha Maestro* dance restaurant was a cross-cultural event where Finnish nationality did not necessarily provide feelings of familiarity or easy routes for identification. A couple of us Finns experienced possibly a greater sense of outsidership because our gender performance as "gender-neutral" scholars<sup>9</sup> was "wrong" in this context. Whereas, those of us who had plenty of previous experience of dance restaurants and couple dancing could easily position themselves, despite their non-Finnishness.

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<sup>9</sup> Academic women choose to perform gender-neutrality in order to survive within the expectations of university life (see, for instance, Babiracki 1997:123-124).

### Various narratives evolving from the performance

The Finnish dance music restaurant proved to be a cross-cultural event in which participants from various cultures could find aspects familiar to them, particularly the familiar gender codes of couple dances. The "Finnishness" of the restaurant was located in the music, which conveyed the gender order of Finland during the 1950s and 60s.

When we are studying an event attempting to capture the presence of it, we intervene with our own performance, and make the event into our own story. Our observations are bounded by our bodily and engendered identities which we negotiate anew in every social situation. While performing ourselves, we construct multiple performance events. That is how we imaginatively create the world and its events. In this process, the boundaries between insiders and outsiders are blurred: we relate to the events through our identities and past experiences and create our own, different readings of an event.

We may ask whether it is possible to regard an event that is seen as a site of multiple performative acts as a bounded event. However, even when the perspectives of constructionism and performativity are used as analytical tools, the event still remains the grounds upon which all these performativities and negotiations take place.

If we accept that social reality is performatively constructed, an event consists of multiple performances and it exists and lives on in its multiple readings and narratives. In that case, the only epistemological basis for the study of an event should be a conviction that each approach creates its own truth through instigating its own perceptions.

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## RODNA IZVEDBA U FINSKOM RESTORANU ZA PLES: REFLEKSIJE NA MULTIKULTURALNI TERENSKI EKSPERIMENT

### SAŽETAK

Članak je prilog refleksivnoj etnomuzikologiji, rodnim studijima glazbe i studijima izvedbe. Izvješćuje o terenskom eksperimentu postavljenom kako bi se istražila rodna izvedba u finskom restoranu za ples. Naročiti je cilj toga terenskoga rada bio razmotriti djelovanje istraživačevih rodnih identiteta i prethodnih iskustava na njegove/njezine

opservacije na terenu. U eksperimentu provedenom 1999. godine sudjelovalo je deset članica studijske skupine Glazba i rod Međunarodnog savjeta za tradicijsku glazbu.

Analiza otkriva kako su prošla iskustva i povijesti te sadašnji čimbenici identiteta — kao što su dob, nacionalnost, rasa, svjetonazor i feminizam — utjecali na opservacije svakoga od posjetitelja te kako se rod posreduje i pozicionira u restoranu za ples. U članku se zaključuje da *izvodeći sebe* konstruiramo mnogoslojan izvedbeni događaj. Tako imaginativno stvaramo svijet i njegove događaje. U tome su procesu zamučene granice između onih koji su unutra i izvan: prema zbivanjima se odnosimo kroz prizmu naših identiteta i prošlih iskustava te stvaramo vlastita, raznovrsna čitanja istoga događaja.

Ključne riječi: rod, izvedba, glazba, ples