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Reducing gendered inequalities in music

Should booking practices be rethought?

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1. Introduction

The cultural sector has recently been transformed by movements against sexual violence and sexism, including the #MeToo phenomena, which initially grew out of the world of cinema, to become one of the precursors. [1] However, these recent changes are anchored in more transversal and cross-disciplinary movements which denounce gender-based inequalities within the artistic world, as with campaigns such as Mouvement HF in France. Spreading public awareness about these inequalities is not new. [2] Nonetheless, practices have evolved recently, as testified by the creation of a commission to monitor the inequalities between women and men, alongside educational training aimed at combating violence – for which public funding can be obtained [3] –, as well as the organization of cultural events by private groups who promote the booking of women artists, and sometimes more broadly of sexual and gender-based minorities. However, the recognition of gender-based inequalities is overdue and they remain difficult to quantify, in particular in the live music sector, given the diversity of performance spaces, individuals, music genres, and employment statuses involved in this sector.

The small proportion of women who appear onstage, in comparison to that of men, is tied to different phenomena. [4] Gender can be defined by a system of division and hierarchization between the masculine and the feminine. [5] Its dominance in artistic hierarchies [6] can be explained by the persistence of stereotypical representations which affect an evaluation of "talent." [7] Surveys on the feminization of "masculine" professions have also emphasized the importance of access routes to these occupations, through the creation of specialist training and diplomas, [8] since co-optation and social capital favor access for men. [9] Indeed, the study of music genres as wide-ranging as jazz [10] and rap [11] shows how these networks are biased towards men.

What I propose here, is to examine two aspects. Firstly, I will lay out a brief panorama of gendered inequalities within the music sector. Then I will investigate the influence of booking in the unequal access to live music. This will shed light upon the processes which occur prior to stepping onto a stage. Studying current booking practices will show what room for maneuver there is to reduce these inequalities in the future. I will be relying upon research undertaken between 2012 and 2017, in venues in Paris and Berlin, involving their musical bookers, as well as representatives of local and national cultural policies. [12] This empirical research cross-references observations on events, interviews, and statistical analyses.

2. An unequal access to the music scene

Contrary to sales numbers or to top charts, [13] it is difficult to quantify the gender-based inequalities in live music, because a comprehensive comparative analysis of concerts, within the same town or country, does not exist. Although data is everywhere today, much of it is focused on consumption practices or on the evaluation of public policies in different sectors. Within this context, the scarcity of data about live music may seem surprising. Beyond the difficulty of assembling these data, this scarcity also bears witness to a resistance to objectivize these inequalities, whether they are gendered or ethno-racial. Indeed, the objectification of inequalities contravenes the representations of "talent," as it does with the French national traditions of egalitarianism and universalism. The controversies surrounding gendered equality within the political arena bear witness to the extent of these oppositions. [14] Despite these difficulties, the recent period has seen an increase in efforts by various organizations – both public and private – to provide and publish figures, which continue to testify to the poor representation of women within the music sector. [15] One might hope that in the future, access to these data will become easier.

Indeed, with music, in comparison with other forms of live performances, such as dance or theater, gender strongly affects artists' trajectories and discriminates in particular against women, [16] who struggle to survive within the music employment market. [17] They must contend with a double phenomena of segregation. Firstly, horizontal, as occurs in classical music and jazz, [18] wherein women are often restricted to the roles of singer, or particular families of instruments. [19] These distinctions map onto artistic hierarchies that are inseparably artistic and gendered. The areas occupied by men are generally granted more cultural legitimacy, as is the case for instrumental music compared to vocal music in jazz. This also appears in the hierarchies between different musical genres, for example between rock and pop music, between rap and R&B, [20] which also refer to hierarchies between the "masculine" and "feminine." These distinctions are compounded by racial divisions, R&B and rap having been inscribed within the filiation of "race music" departments at the beginning of the twentieth century, in the American recorded music industry. Secondly, this segregation is also vertical as these hierarchies extend into the organization of the music workplace, [21] where women rarely reach the most prestigious positions, such as those of soloists or conductors. [22] In France, between 2013 and 2017, women represented 1 % of all composers, 4 % of all conductors and 23 % of instrumentalists. [23]

The presence of women is stronger in highbrow genres such as "classical music" than in "popular" or "current" music (as these are categorized by the French cultural policies, *musiques actuelles*). The fact that classical music training generally takes place in a specific educational context, which formalizes the learning process, seems to favor women's presence, even if they are assigned less prestigious roles. Within popular music, the place held by women artists varies according to the masculine or feminine representations

associated with the musical genres and increases within styles where vocals are important. Gendered inequalities are stronger when considering instrumentalists in popular music: only 8 % are women in the "current" music sector compared with 39 % in classical music, in 2001. The number of women singers is similar, with 55 % and 58 % of women, respectively. [24] The rare number of surveys in electronic music also bears witness to inequalities. Thus, between 2012 and 2017, activists from the group Female:pressure counted 14 % of artists – on average – who performed at electronic music festivals were women (10,4 % in France). [25]

3. Booking: how gendered inequalities are produced in gatekeeping access to the stage

Gendered inequalities in gaining access to a music scene appear clearly. Their causes are multifactorial and cannot be blamed upon a lack of women artists, or a lack of "talent" on their behalf. As with access to senior levels of public service, the explanation for these inequalities "has shifted from women and their supposed lesser ambitions, tied to their family socialization and to the constraints of their "double life" – an interpretation summarized by the idea of a "self-censorship" –, towards the advantages provided to men throughout their lives." [26] Gendered divisions in the workplace largely rest upon women's role in domestic labor and raising children. These also impact the gendered differentiation in cultural practices, for instance amateur practices. [27] But these gendered inequalities are also due to the organizations within which women perform (such as the venues) and the way these organizations function and hierarchize activities – something that can be likened to the production of ethno-racial inequalities as well. In order to study these inequalities, a key link is often left aside, although it is decisive in artists gaining access to the stage: cultural intermediaries, [28] those who orchestrate the meeting of audiences and artists. In the music field, studying the bookers, who choose which artists perform, is essential for understanding these inequalities.

Two elements are highlighted and distinguished here – despite them overlapping in reality. Firstly, the way in which intermediaries (re)produce stereotypes and norms according to gender and "race," [29] which frame their appreciation, and thus the unequal value attributed to artists. Heterosexism is often translated through the devaluation of the artistic expressions of groups that are marginalized, compared to the majority group, as are women and minorities of both gender and sexuality. The struggle against inequalities thus also questions the dominant aesthetic hierarchies: it cannot be understood as an injunction to minority groups to just better "fit" into existing (artistic) norms. Secondly, in order to understand these inequalities, one needs to study the work practices of cultural intermediaries, practices that tend to favor the dominance of men onstage. To better grasp this issue, I will present the differences between booking practices in non-classical music

venues in Paris and Berlin. Indeed, women are a little more present in Berlin's electronic music venues, although they remain a minority there too. Studying both capitals allows us to see how stereotypes and booking practices meld in the upholding, or the lessening, of gendered inequalities.

Paris and Berlin, two different music scenes

Both capitals have diverging historical and urban contexts. These have impacted their music scenes and this has also resulted in a relatively distinct choice in booking in their music venues. Schematically, Paris is a much more professionalized scene than Berlin, where a greater number of music venues do not pay their workforce or the artists themselves. Another notable characteristic is the strong *entre-soi* between bookers in Paris. Indeed, in the relatively renowned and central Parisian venues, which present diverse genres (rock, pop, Francophone *chanson*, electronic music, etc.) the bookers know each other well, and have often worked in the same venues, etc. In Berlin, the networks between different venues are less dense, even between some of the most central venues; there are fewer "cliques." [30] This situation results in two fundamentals that notably distinguish both scenes: the (social) diversity among cultural intermediaries; the proximity between music and activist scenes. These elements have an effect on the bookers' work practices, and thus, artistic choices.

Booking collectively, or how to diversify selection networks

In Berlin, booking at a number of venues is undertaken by a collective group, consisting of several people to sometimes over ten. These collectives have grown out of activist traditions, from the far left, that are particularly tied to the city's history. In many cases, they allow for their members to combine booking, which is an unpaid activity here, with paid employment, sometimes outside of the cultural sector. The real estate market, which is more accessible than in Paris, enables these situations by strongly reducing rental costs. In other cases, these collectives are explicitly politicized, and this is translated into how the venue is managed, some paying all of the workers equally (at the box office, booking, bar, security, etc.). In Paris, there are very few venues in which it is a collective that books the artists, rather than only one person, even though multiple collectives have been created in recent years, in particular for electronic music. However, these more recent collectives often produce events that are then booked in venues, and rarely manage the venues themselves.

Yet, booking line-ups curated by collectives have an important effect on the diversity of artistic selections. Indeed, collectives often bring together individuals with heterogeneous backgrounds (in terms of nationality, education, etc.), working in varied music genres, and whose choices speak to diverse audiences. On the contrary, the competition which exists as a result of a single booking position tends to restrict the profiles of bookers and to create a normalization of backgrounds, as can be witnessed in Paris where the bookers' trajectories are more similar, for example in their education and their access to this career. This also contributes to a focalization on certain music genres that are more dominant than others.

Diversity in trajectories generally contributes to a greater variety in networks upon which intermediaries rely in order to select artists. Furthermore, it is not rare in Berlin for bookers of medium-sized venues to rely directly upon booking requests from artists – something that is rather frowned upon by their Parisian counterparts, as it is perceived as an indicator of the artists' non-professional status. Indeed, preference is given to those artists who are recommended by the "right" intermediaries (managers, tour promoters, etc.): those who are already known to the bookers. These diversified networks and methods of selection in Berlin lower the barriers to entry for less well-known – more marginalized – artists and thus for women and gender minorities. In Paris, these artists find it hard to break through into the prevalent networks of intermediaries, to whose eyes they remain "invisible," when all it sometimes requires to see them is to "look under the rug" (which is to say to look elsewhere than usual), as this extract from an interview shows:

"*When we started to work [...], what was said was, "there are no women in the rock music scene, in reality." This is a very macho, coded music, and at that time, there were very few women who put themselves in the spotlight, at least onstage. The PJ Harveys, the Cat Powers, were just emerging. And, in fact, it was by taking a look under the rug that we realized that we just had to make lots of young, and not so young, girls stand out from the crowd, who had real careers, but simply weren't showcased."* (Booker for a medium size venue showcasing varied music genres [31])

The professional criteria for selection: what is an "artistic" criteria?

The second decisive difference between Paris and Berlin is that the weaker professionalization of booking in the German capital has led to a greater interconnection between music and political scenes, in particular feminist and LGBTQI+ activists. This does not mean that in Paris these scenes are totally distinct because, in the past few years, there has been a strong development of events supporting feminist and LGBTQI+ discourses, as well as artists from gender and sexual minorities. Nonetheless, this connection is stronger in Berlin, where some venues are financed by activist groups. In these venues, political principles are translated into the way they are managed, and not only in small, alternative venues; this also concerns relatively central and renowned electronic music clubs. Some of them, for example, pay particular attention to the number of women and LGBTQI+ artists in their line-ups, as well as within their own employees in the artistic, technical and security teams. This is the case in the well-known club for electronic music called About Blank (written *://about blank*). From the outset, these criteria were integrated into the club's operation and management and this has contributed in legitimizing it with other venues.

Conversely, in Paris, it is common to find cultural intermediaries for whom these criteria are seen as illegitimate, because they are perceived as "extra-artistic," which is to say, non-professional. However, this overlooks and denies the social – and thus gendered, but also ethno-racial – dimension of artistic hierarchies. Sometimes, bookers also assimilate the selection of artists from minority groups to a devaluation of artistic choices. In Berlin, taking into account artists' social properties as a criterion for selection, is also supported by

the representatives of public authorities in cultural policies, who for that matter insist on the relative parity of which artists are booked, in the choice of projects they finance: "I just said to my jury, the quality of the music and the artist is the first point [in selecting artists for a residency], that's really important. Secondly, please choose 50 % male and female, and they did it and that's really good." [32]

Conclusion

The inequalities in gaining access to a music scene for people from minorities must be understood more broadly than simply as a result of the constraints that weigh upon artists (such as the unequal, gendered, division of domestic work). The role of artistic hierarchies, cultural policies and cultural intermediaries in the production of these inequalities should also be at the center of renewed attention. The struggle against inequalities is first made possible by their recognition and "visibilization." It also means understanding the "gender bias" as it is posited in the representations and practices of professionals in the music industry. Differences between Paris and Berlin show that these inequalities also have a lot to do with the way people work, in this case, the booking practices. Therefore, calling into question these inequalities, whether they are gendered or not, asks for a thorough reflection on professional structures, trajectories, and the hierarchies specific to these professions, which are also the foundations to the artistic hierarchies supported by cultural intermediaries. This is what the debate on the "right" criteria to select artists for bookings reveals.

Fortunately, in France there is a growing awareness on the subject of gendered inequalities in the cultural sector, something that is also starting to be translated into cultural policies. This also means taking seriously the fight against sexual violence and sexism, by going further than preventative training, by collectively creating and implementing protocols adapted to situations where violence is suspected and/or recognized. Furthermore, in the future, the cultural sector should adopt a more direct approach to other inequalities, which have their specificities, such as those concerning race or persons with special needs. As with gendered inequalities, these require in turn that artistic hierarchies be questioned, so that in the future, music's many voices may be heard.

These issues should be examined at all levels: prior to taking the stage, in the leisure activities of children and adolescents, as well as in music education; in making choices for the stage and in subsidizing different scenes; but also in the assessment of diversity among audiences. For professionals in the music industry, this means rethinking the way in which they work, but also in relinquishing – and maybe this is the hardest part – the formulas which would be a sure-fire "success," of what has been done in the past, or of what audiences "want." Risks have to be taken for less typical artists to be introduced: fashions and trends, audience "tastes," all of these evolve over time, according to the choices that are made by those who produce artists.

In turn, to fight these inequalities, artists may have to focus on dynamics that are more collective, which is not always easy in a highly competitive sector where financial disparities are blatant. This struggle cannot be led only by a small minority who are consequently putting their careers at risk. Instead, it is essential that those who are the most visible and audible take a stand and act, to change power dynamics. Finally, with regards to audiences, this implies becoming aware of how these social hierarchies permeate tastes and evaluations of talent. For example, how artists are hierarchized and how we speak about them, who we think is legitimate to recommend "good" music, why we consider certain genres of music or songs "bad," "mainstream," or on the contrary "mythical." Cultural policies, which play a central role in cultural hierarchies, might thus sustain these transformations. At first, by a closer examination of training and careers, not only of artists, but also of those who work in the music industry. Within these groups, there is a genuine scope for improvement in order to favor greater diversity in their backgrounds and professional trajectories. Then, by reassessing how public subsidies are distributed. Indeed, the struggle for more equality does not play out only on a political level, but also on an economic one. As subsidies for culture drop and competition between artists and cultural venues rises, and as difficulties relating to the recent Covid-19 crisis surge, reducing inequalities also more broadly means supporting the whole of the cultural sector. Let us hope that the hierarchies between what is "essential" and what is "nonessential," as culture was termed during lockdown, will not remain anchored within our societies, as this opposition also encompasses other social inequalities. Nonetheless, the transformations underway within music scenes today attest that there is hope and change along the way.

Translated from French by Dom Savage and Myrtille Picaud

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1. This article is a modified version of a research article, which is recommended to those who wish a more in-depth study of the mechanisms at play: Picaud M., "Quand le genre entre en scène. Configurations professionnelles de la programmation musicale et inégalités des artistes dans deux capitales européennes", Sociétés contemporaines, vol. 119, no 3, 2020, p. 143-168.
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30. This concept comes from the sociology of network analysis, it traditionally refers to a group of interconnected individuals, who all know one another.
31. Interview undertaken in Paris 29 October 2015.
32. Representative for a local public organization offering support for popular music. Interview undertaken in Berlin 15 November 2013.