

Discourses On Physical Disability and Music in the 20th and 21st Century (working title)

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My Research project is about deviant bodies, in particular bodies that are classified as disabled, and music in the 20th and 21st century. This will be examined on two broad fronts: musical performance and specific musical compositions. My dissertation's aim is to show that physical variability (socially defined as disability) does not categorically exclude music ability.

After establishing in the introduction a link between Disability Studies and Musicology and Disability Studies, the first chapter “Performing Music – Performing Disability,” based on theories of the subject and identity, I am asking how disabled musicians deal with their disability, especially in performative situations. Like no other art form, music and musical performance is defined by normative ideas about “ability” and “disability.” But what does it mean to be disabled as a professional musician? Examining the performativity of disability in public performances, I ask about the construction of subjectivity and identity of physically disabled musicians. Further, I will illuminate the media’s depiction of disability in order to examine the concept of “professionalism” in regards to disabled musicians. I am also asking about the intersections between gender and disability. Does it matter if you are a male or female disabled musician? Are beauty norms more connected to women than men?

My other interest is, how physical disability or physical abnormality is processed in musical works. The second chapter, “Music, Body, Disability” investigates the musical representation of disability, in respect to how disability influences certain musical pieces and how disability is being used as an artistic resource for compositions. The first subchapter of this part “Corrections” deals with pieces for one-handed piano players. Using Foucault’s ideas about discipline and reading virtuosity as prosthesis, with which disability can be overcome, I ask about the performance strategies of one-handed piano players. In the next chapter, “Technology.Disability.Music” it will be explored how technology can be used to ensure the accessibility of music for disabled musicians through a discussion of authenticity and the use of technology.

The last chapter “The Anomalous and Grotesque in contemporary music and the modern Subject” is devoted to certain pieces of the German composer Helmut Oehring. Oehring was

raised as a hearing child of deaf parents, and therefore his mother tongue is sign language. As a composer his oeuvre is, of course, also influenced by his biography, which means that Oehring composes in sign language. For him hand-signs and sign-language are “instruments,” which are equal and important parts of his compositions. By the example of several works it will be shown how Helmut Oehring translates sign-language into music. For the first time in Western music history, Helmut Oehring as a composer also brings together deaf-mute soloists and also choirs on stage alongside singers and orchestra, in this way the performative elements of the movement patterns of sign-language are also integrated in his compositions. So the usage of gesture and sign-language and the conscious use of movement patterns make Oehring’s works on the one hand a visual/gestural and on the other hand also an auditive experience. In Helmut Oehring’s works disability acquires a positive re-evaluation through artistic implementation.