Sound Expertise – Season 2, Episode 1 – Making Sense of Music with Susan McClary

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TRANSCRIPT

SPEAKERS
Will Robin, Susan McClary

Susan McClary 00:00
At a certain point, one of my colleagues in Women's Studies started inviting me to feminist conferences, saying, does music have anything to do with gender? And at the time, I thought -- well, nobody ever said it did, I don't know. But then as soon as the question was posed, I mean, the answer was obvious. Of course it does. It's everywhere. It is informing... certainly opera. And even when I was writing about opera, there was all kinds of hysteria from musicogists -- how does opera have anything to do with gender? But I also started bringing it into instrumental music, which was the great taboo.

00:47
[Music]

Will Robin 01:10
Can musicology change the world? There are many different kinds of -ologists who are making a difference around the globe today. Epidemiologists are fighting a deadly pandemic, climatologists are helping us understand the dangers of global warming, sociologists are describing the perils of technology run amok. With such high stakes, those of us who study music would not seem to have all that much to offer. We can't cure diseases, or solve the climate crisis, or stop Facebook from destroying our democracy. But I fundamentally believe, I really do, that we still have a significant role to play. Welcome to season two of Sound Expertise. I'm your host, Will Robin. And this is a podcast where I talk to my fellow music scholars about their research and why it matters. On this season, we'll be speaking with many different kinds of academics -- musicologists, music theorists, ethnomusicologists, anthropologists -- about ideas that I believe can change the world, or at the very least change how we think about the role of music in it. We'll learn about the importance of spirituals in the civil rights movement, how algorithms curate our musical lives, the sexiness of 17th century madrigals, what Rebecca Black's Friday can tell us about internet virality, and much more. And if musicology can change the world, then without a doubt, my guest today is one of the scholars who has done so. Susan McClary, Professor of Music at Case Western Reserve University, is inarguably the most controversial musicologist alive today, if not ever. Since the 1980s. her writings on topics from Monteverdi to Madonna have fundamentally changed how we think about the relationship between music, gender, and sexuality. Professor McClary's groundbreaking work, including her pioneering 1991 book _Feminine Endings_, has been subject to intense scrutiny and debate, much of which, as we will discuss, is less about her actual thoughtful research and more about conservative anxieties about what kinds of stories get told, and who is allowed to tell them. The musicological world we live in today has been profoundly shaped by Professor McClary. Let's hear how.

[Music]

So for my kind of generation of scholars, it's really kind of impossible to imagine what musicology would be without _Feminine Endings_, and kind of your your work more broadly. But you obviously grew up, you know, in a scholarly world without the book that you ended up writing, and that was not necessarily as focused on issues of gender and sexuality and power in music. So maybe just to start off, could you talk a little bit about what musicology was like, when you became interested in musicology, what the main issues were, how you kind of got started to have an interest in musicology?

Susan McClary 04:12
Sure. I was hooked on early music when in history survey, when I was an undergraduate, this would have been around 1966, our teacher played I think Harnoncourt's Orfeo for us. And that was one of the first big recordings with original instruments, and I thought it was the most amazing stuff I had ever heard. Now, I had -- I was a piano major at the time, and was a coach and accompanist for nearly everybody in my school. I was at Southern Illinois University. And I actually thought at the time that you could put any score from the 18th or 19th century in front of me, and I could tell you what to do with it. And I still believe that. So suddenly, here was this music, and I didn't have a clue how it worked, not a clue. And I thought, wow, this is the most amazing stuff I ever heard. And I don't have any idea how it works. So I actually thought that what musicologists did was what I could do with 18th and 19th century music, only with early music. So I went off to graduate school at Harvard, thinking that that's what I would do, I would figure out how early music operated, only to find that musicologists did not deal with music at all, not at all. The two routes that were open for us -- musicologists were supposed to do archival work, we were supposed to go and find new sources, new information. We hadn't, we weren't supposed to be distracted by the music, it wasn't supposed to be part of what we did.

Will Robin 06:21
The detail of the score... right.

Susan McClary 06:23
And music theorists, really, were not interested in history, and certainly weren't interested in early music. So nothing that I thought I was going to do was really available to me. And I was put on a track to do an archival dissertation, I had become very interested in a seminar run by Nino Pirrotta, in Alessandro Stradella. And, again, I listened to this music, or I played it on the piano, there was ... there weren't recordings. So I would sit and I would play this stuff. And I would think, damn, I don't have any idea of how this works. And this is amazing stuff. And ... but then I would realize, no, no, I'm supposed to be upstairs finding where I might discover new biographical sources, because that's my job.

Will Robin 07:25
So the idea was basically dig up more and more information about these obscure figures, rather than actually kind of understand how their musics was constructed.

Susan McClary 07:33

Exactly. So I would, I would do that for a while, every day, I would poke around in the library. And then I would think, Oh, I'm going to take a break, I'm going to go down to the practice rooms, so I'm going to play through some of this stuff again. And then suddenly, there would be a tap of the door, and they were closing the building. This happened day after day after day. And finally, I just decided, you know, this is really all I'm interested in, you could put all the information in the world about a Alessandro Stradella in a mailbox across the street from me, and I'm not sure I would be compelled to go and get it.

Will Robin 08:19
[laughs] The power was not in that, it was in the actual music.

Susan McClary 08:22
No. So I went to my advisor, and I said, so what I want to do is figure out how 17th century music works. And he said, that doesn't make any sense. It doesn't work. And I said, Well, yes, it does. And I want to be able to figure out how, what are the mechanisms, what is the grammar? And he said, okay, you know, there are a lot of smart people who have tried to deal with this music, and they didn't get anywhere. Here's a rope, go hang yourself. So, with that green light, I went off, and I decided that's what I would do. Now I was married at the time, which meant that all the professors had written me off. I was not going to make anything of my life. And they told me that. So they actually didn't care what kind of foolishness I thought I was going to do. Because I was married, and I was just going to have kids and I was just going to spend my life washing diapers. So, this was my green light. And so I spent my time reading Italian treatises of the 16th century, because that's the last place where people actually thought they knew what their music was doing and wrote down what they thought it was. So I spent a lot of time reading, Zarlino and people like him. And I spent a lot of time just at the piano playing the music and forbidding myself from using my tonal tools, because I realized those did not work. So I put a clamp on all of the music theory I knew, and didn't allow it to come to the surface.

Will Robin 10:25
Wow. influence. Yeah.

Susan McClary 10:28
During that time, I actually lost my ability to speak because I had so tamped down my verbal side of the brain working with this, that by... one day, I went to the door because there was a UPS man there. And I just went ... I could not talk. So I thought, Okay, this has gone far enough. And I started drawing strange patterns on napkins and things like that. I mean, I had a sense of what I wanted to do. I also realize that you know, if Stradella was weird, Carissimi was even weirder than that. And Monteverdi was, was strange just yet. So I decided that I would try to start with modal Monteverdi, for which we have materials. And then my work worked my way forward. So my dissertation started off to be Stradella for the law and ended up being about Monteverdi.

Will Robin 11:32
Right. So the reason like you had to lock down your theory chops, and the reason why your adviser told you that doesn't make sense is because the whole kind of grounding of any look inside music that musicology was doing was based around tonality and post-1700 ideas, right, and you wanted to say this is not tonal music, we have to find a new vocabulary to describe it.

Susan McClary 11:55
that's right. Because we weren't going to be able to get anywhere. The principal theory that surrounded this music was that it wasn't modal anymore, but it wasn't tonal either. And so there was this kind of Nowhere Land. And it seemed to me that I had to start with a very strong sense of how late 16th century modal music worked. If I could analyze that music, in the same way that I was able to work with 18th and 19th century music, then I could begin to see what had to shift in order to get us to mid 17th century ways of doing music. I couldn't start with tonality and go back, right? And, and so what I discovered, and if you will, and these are the basis of my books, _Modal Subjectivity_, and _Desire and Pleasure in 17th Century Music_, is that it's really not a matter of pitch, it's a matter of temporality. It's a matter of taking very, very simple patterns, really just the descent from five to one, and figuring out how to prolong that, with the chords that we understand to be tonal. There are cadential patterns. But what composers are doing in the first decades of the 17th century is figuring out how to take this, you know, those cadential patterns, which are very, very clear to everybody, and figure out how to push further and further and further the point where you have to say, and now we have arrived. So we're dealing with a radically different temporality. And the texts that are chosen by Monteverdi or Carissimi or any of these people, I mean, they all are dealing with that sense of now we know how to be airborne, we know how to take something that had been pretty much lockstep and make it go like that. And that's what tonality then turns out to be. Now, those old modal structures that -- five going down to one -- which is the strongest progression you can have in the 16th century, is what Schenker discovers from the other direction kind of digging backwards. So, what I was looking at is the invention of all those middle-ground strategies, you know, how to take this very simple thing, which turns out to be the background of all tonal music. But as long as we were just dealing with chords, we weren't going to get anywhere at all. Because the hierarchy, the levels in which they were working, were so radically different, Right. It's a different system. Yeah. And so I mean, one of the things -- and I can't remember where you wrote it but I enjoyed reading it was, you know, you said part of the appeal of 17th century for music was it was the sexiest music you'd ever heard. What... how did that factor into your analysis? Like, what was about that music that had this kind of eroticism or sexiness to it, that that kind of latched you on to it? Well, I mean, a large part of it is that, that sense of desire, and the the simplest pattern we have for creating and relieving desire in music is a V/I progression at a cadence, you can prolong a dominant, and we all yearn for that resolution. You know, I can make you beg for a pitch that you didn't care about a minute ago, just by creating that build up, and then withholding the resolution. And you will beg for that resolution, right? So that is a sense that really gets harnessed in the 17th century. You have cadences in the 16th century, of course, but they're not concerned with damming up all of that energy, and prolonging and postponing, and all of that. So it's a matter of taking some devices that had been very localized, and figuring out how to use them for mobilization. And that makes for this, you know, this very eroticizedmusical language that emerges in the 17th century.

Will Robin 17:02
And so the kind of work you're doing on Monteverdi in the 17th century is unusual for its time, but it's also not the work of Feminine Endings that made you so controversial, you know, a decade or a couple decades later. So, you know, I was interested in reading how that trajectory kind of unfolded which involved, right, a series of kind of peer review rejections of of your early work, can you talk a little bit

about, it's not too painful, some of these rejections and what they signified and how that got you to work on later music and different kinds of music?

Susan McClary 17:32
Sure. I mean, if somebody had just taken that early stuff on modal analysis seriously, I probably would still be happily doing that. And musicology wouldn't have been turned over. [laughs] But I would get rejection slips that just said, You don't seem to understand, this music doesn't work. My very first AMS presentation was on Monteverdi's "Cruda Amarilli", in which I was explaining that head on collision that everybody talks about as an added ninth chord. And they wonder, Well, you know, so what's the problem, you know, it's just a ninth chord.

18:22
[Music: opening of Monteverdi's "Cruda Amarilli"]

Susan McClary 18:32
It's actually a headlong collision between two modes that are very carefully set up. So, I gave this talk and just said, we think of this as Mixolydian This is where all of these things are occurring. And this is how to make sense of all of these anomalous parts of this madrigal. And there was no gender in it, there was no sex, there was no nothing. It was just -- if we think about this as modal, then you know, there are these things that make sense. And I almost got lynched. People were screaming. I mean, I have ... I've somehow or other always tripped onto controversy. You know, here I was just this graduate student giving a talk on a madrigal and, I mean, really all hell broke loose. And Claude Palisca, this very grand old musicologist, at a certain point, stood up and just said, you know, you all have to stop this, this is just obscene. And so then I started sending out papers to get published. And I always got back these things saying, You don't seem to understand, modes don't work. And I just thought... or this music doesn't work. I mean, how can we, as musicologists, drag our students through Dufay and Ockeghem and Josquin and Monteverdi and all of these people and then say this music doesn't work. I mean, this just seems crazy to me. It seemed crazy at the time, it still seems crazy. So I wasn't getting anywhere. I was an assistant professor, I didn't have a word in print. And I didn't seem to be about to get anything in print. I was at the University of Minnesota, and there were some very stimulating interdisciplinary programs there. One of them was the Women's Studies program. And one of them was a Humanities Center. The Humanities Center was hooked up with the University of Minnesota press, which at the time was the main translator of all of the European cultural theorists. So I was meeting Lyotard and Foucault and Derrida and all of these people, and, and I thought, Okay, so, you know, there are ways of thinking about culture that we need to be examining and bringing into musicology. At a certain point, one of my colleagues in women's studies started inviting me to feminist conferences, saying, does music have anything to do with gender? And at the time, I thought, well, nobody ever said it did. I don't know. But then as soon as the question was posed, I mean, the answer was obvious. Of course it does. It's everywhere. It is informing certainly opera. And even when I was writing about opera, there was all kinds of hysteria from musicologists. How does opera have anything to do with gender? But I also started bringing it into instrumental music, which was the great taboo,

Will Robin 22:13

I guess, part of this too, right, Is that you... You know, the way in which that people were saying this music doesn't work, talking about 17th century music, was because there was also kind of a misunderstanding about the later music, right, which is that you kind of wanted to address too; like, you had to figure out the later music, and how that worked in a different way to get to the earlier music, and maybe this is what you're about to say.

Susan McClary 22:35
Yeah, no, I think that's precisely right. I mean, once the question of tonality as contingent arises, then I had to say, Well, what is it when it does arrive? And what does it mean? And what does it do? How is it an active cultural force? And that brought me very much into the 18th and 19th centuries. Of course, like all musicologist, so I was always teaching history surveys, always teaching courses on opera. And so every time I would go through these, I would hear and notice more and more things that were... that responded to cultural theory, that responded to feminist theory, that responded to all of these things. But in order to make the early musics make sense, you know, I had to question what kind of sense 18th and 19th century music made.

Will Robin 23:48
And how did feminist theory kind of help you do that and start to ask the questions that you began to ask?

Susan McClary 23:55
Well, the question of desire, which I had intuited all the way back in my undergraduate years, when I first heard Orfeo, it became not just a question of is there desire here, but, you know, following Foucault, I started thinking, so desire has a cultural history, it is shaped differently. And one of the things that's exciting about music is that we have these extraordinary traces of the ways that a composer like Arcadelt in the middle of the 16th century, thought, that desire felt, we have Monteverdi, we have all of these very different ways of construing the body of construing desire of construing, physical pleasure of construing gender, all of these things have histories, and they're audible in music. That's why in all of my work, I always start with music. I never start with, oh, here's an interesting idea. I wonder if there's any music that does that. It's always -- I hear these things. And then I start thinking, does anything else at that time correspond to that? I mean, are these... Am I making this up? Is this subjective? Or are these structures of feeling that also show up at this time in literature, in the visual arts, in dance? You know, but I always start with the music. Yeah.

Will Robin 25:40
And so feminine endings is, you know, kind of collects a series of work that you had been developing, I guess, through the 80s. Right. Can you talk a little bit about how those publications developed and what their reception kind of was leading up to this book?

Susan McClary 25:54
Sure. So the pieces that had already appeared, were a piece on Monteverdi, which I had presented at the AMS meeting, on how Monteverdi construes Orfeo and Euridice, of the ways in which he shapes their discourse, with Orfeo always as, as harnessing and creating these huge trajectories. And Euridice always just eating her words, you know, just constantly apologizing for anything she says. And so her

music is actually much more complicated. I mean, how do you create the sense of I want to say something, but I just can't. And, you know, and that I thought really linked up a lot with what we know about literature of the time, how masculine discourse and discourse by men put in the mouths of women, how those operated. I also had been teaching a course on women and music. My students at the time, were all listening to Madonna, this was mid 80s. And so she was coming through Minneapolis and was doing a concert, and I decided, well, I should go and see what this is like. And so I went really very dubious. And I didn't know popular music. I was just blown away by her force. And by just the feminist critique that I was seeing, I thought, Oh, my God, you know, she is doing things that I wouldn't even dare do, or think about doing. And she's doing that in front of everybody. And so I wrote a piece about her. And I wrote a piece about Laurie Anderson, who at the time was known by people in popular music, but not otherwise. And I was invited to a conference called time and space in recent music. And I thought, Well, I mean, that would be a great thing to do, because she's working so much with those parameters, only to find that everybody else there was dealing with pitch class sets. [Both laugh] And here I was talking about, you know, sex and gender. Oh, well.

Will Robin 28:46
That's kind of the common pattern, I guess, in this period of you showing up at these conferences. I guess the odd one out,

Susan McClary 28:54
Yeah, yeah, I was kind of oops, there was a place where I did quote Madonna, you know, so oops, I didn't know I couldn't talk about sex. You know, I mean, that's, it has been sort of a mantra all the way through this. Yeah.

Will Robin 29:11
When, you know, I mean, you were the, I guess, maybe a little bit of the oddball at some of these settings. But you also kind of discover a couple important colleagues. And then this term, the "new musicology" starts to float around. What did that -- when did you first hear that you were a "new musicologist"? And what did that mean? And how did you kind of assemble something of I guess, a movement or I don't even know what you would call it.

Susan McClary 29:34
We didn't assemble anything. The other people who were close colleagues of mine who were also working on those cutting edge issues, though it often in very different ways. were Rose Subotnik, who had just published an amazing piece in JAMS on Adorno and late Beethoven, so she got me reading Adorno. And ... who still is, you know, just always by my elbow. I mean, he says some things especially about popular music that are clearly just bonkers. But when he is dealing with the German canon, his project is to say, if we had listened carefully to the music, would we have been able to stop the Holocaust. So the stakes are enormous. And he finds ways of reading all of that music in ways that are culturally informed, and I still find what he has to say about Beethoven, what he has to say about Mahler to be, you know, just unsurpassed. So all of that I got from Rose. Rose also pushed me to read Foucault. And from Foucault, I got that gender, sexuality, desire, all of these things have histories. And that was tremendously important for everything I do. Another person, very important was Larry Kramer, who was just beginning to do hermeneutic work, starting with songs, Schubert songs, his very early

books. Nobody else in musicology was trying to look at a score and say, What does that mean? And Larry was doing that. And Larry and I then met up at AMS meetings and became very, very close friends. Probably the most important person was Richard Leppert, who came out of musicology, but also art history. And he was dealing with musical issues, as they connected with visual iconography. And so I think that was my gang. Nobody was forming a movement, nobody was trying to pressure anybody to do anything. And so we were all kind of surprised to find that this label had been put on us as though we were involved with a movement. You know, I don't know, our work is sympathetic, we're involved with similar projects of trying to deal with cultural meanings inside the music itself. Otherwise, I think our work has not a whole lot in common. What I would say is that when we started off, and I think that we all still are in that position, we all wanted to create a bridge between history and analysis. And that was much more important than any kind of ideology, or any kind of cultural theory. It was, I mean, how do we break that logjam, where musicologists heap up more and more editions and factoids, and music theorists label chords? I mean, you know, how do you make history and analysis speak to each other. And that is at the core of what all of us were concerned with. Not feminism, not any particular set of arguments, except that we ought to be able to read music in cultural terms.

Will Robin 34:06
And that's, I mean, underlying all the essays in Feminine Endings, but on the other hand, like Feminine Endings is probably received more for the kind of sensational, or at least the response is more kind of focused on the more sensational aspects. What was it like when that came out? How did that work? What kind of impact did it make as a book?

Susan McClary 34:26
Well, you know, I had been hanging out in feminist circles by that time, when I would give these papers at feminist conferences. I mean, I seemed really middle of the road. Everybody was really excited that somebody was trying to talk about music. They liked what I heard, but it was ... it really was not radical at all. And so when I published the book, I didn't really expect very much. I mean, this is University of Minnesota press. It was a really drab looking book. And you know, who was going to pay attention to this? I didn't have any kind of reputation. I had published almost nothing. And so this book comes out. And it was largely my detractors that made it into a sensation, into a huge deal. For those of ... the people who who sort of agreed with me, it was Yeah, like, Yeah, sure. Yeah. I agree with all that stuff. Okay. Well, now what? And so I wasn't really expecting to have the explosion that occurred. Certainly not the hostility, the animus, the death threats? You know, I mean, you know, it was really kind of extraordinary, that the violence of the response, except I think back to my foray at the AMS when I talked about mode and Cruda Amarilli and got similar reactions.

Will Robin 36:21
You know, I don't know if you want to talk about this. We don't have to talk about it if you want to, because I'm sure you've had to litigate it a million times. But do you want to talk about the Beethoven IX controversy?

Susan McClary 36:30
Why did I think this was what was going to happen?

Will Robin 36:33
Again, like, I'm happy -- we can cut it....

Susan McClary 36:36
No no no no no

Will Robin 36:37
... because rereading it, as you've said before, it's not that contro... it shouldn't be controversial. The, you know, the idea of taking, I guess, bringing -- Yeah, just bringing extramusical ideas to music is --- yeah, I don't know. How did you come to write this essay? And what did it What did it? What unfolded?

Susan McClary 37:00
Yeah, well, that essay, let me start by saying the, every other year since 1980, I have taught a seminar on Beethoven quartets.

Will Robin 37:12
Yes, I remember reading that...

Susan McClary 37:13
I'm deeply immersed in in Beethoven, I just turned in my grades for the last iteration of that course. No one who has ever taken a course with me could ever imagine that I would have anything except the most worshipful views of Beethoven. So this came about when Greg Sandow who was at the time, a critic of new music in the Village Voice, and who, whose work influenced me a lot. I mean, I started reading everything he had to say about the downtown composers in the 1980s. And in all of my work in postmodernism, it's really owing to him. So the article really is about temporality. It's about minimalism, and the ways in which minimalism is creating a very different temporality. And it's, it was confusing to a lot of people at the time, they found that the music didn't go anywhere, it just didn't do anything. So that was a set of Glass and Reich and, you know, all the biggies. And so, one of my friends in Minneapolis, Janika, Vandervelde, was writing some sort of minimalist pieces, and she would get all of these responses. Well, you know, it just doesn't go anywhere. You know, this music sucks. And so the principal thing that that essay meant to do was to say, no, it works in a different way. It is organizing time in a different way. Now, this should resonate with what I was saying about the 16th and 17th century, right. I mean, that's sort of my mantra, this is what I do. And so I wanted to talk about why composers might have wanted to turn away from the power of that teleological trajectory that that tonal music has, and a lot of it is violent. It condones violence, it incites violence. The end of Carmen, for instance. I mean, Bizet makes us so desire that he kill her by ...with the music that he sets off, you know, I mean that sense of tonal closure demanding that sacrifice is so powerful. And so Greg was in the Twin Cities at the time, I can't even remember now why. But he was supposed to write something with me for the Minnesota composers forum newsletter. And we decided that we would talk about minimalism, we would talk about Janika's music, about the ways in which people just said, you know, nothing happens. So, so we thought we needed to have an example that we thought was completely obvious of the violence that tonal music can bring about. And it wasn't the whole Ninth Symphony, it certainly wasn't all of Beethoven was to that moment, at recapitulation, where there has been this tremendous build up, this tremendous desire trajectory, and then just when it appears that we are going

to have to cadence on -- and that meant in within the economy of that piece, go back to the beginning, where you know, you're nothing there, you know, suddenly slams on the brakes, and just keeps banging and banging and banging. And it is horrific. I mean, I've had students get up and leave the room crying when we have ... when we're listening to that piece, not because anything that I've said, I mean, we've enured ourselves to how really kind of awful that is. But of course, he keeps working, and there's the sublime third movement. And then the fourth movement tries to figure out how to get to a conclusion that is viable. Right, after that. But in the first movement that is cataclysmic. And Adrienne Rich, the great feminist poet had just written a poem about Beethoven's Ninth. And so that seemed like a good thing to cite. So, you know, this isn't just me making this up. You know, so, and remember, I was writing this with Greg Sandow. Yeah. And so it came out. And there was a mini histeria fit just in Minnesota when it came out in the news.

Will Robin 42:42
And just to be clear, so you describe this moment as -- you call it a rape? I can't remember the exact ...,

Susan McClary 42:48
Yeah. as a rapist who cannot find closure. And so just keeps, you know, that strangulating rage? So, I mean, one of the ... as it turns out -- and Bob Fink has gone back and looked into and found that music critics going all the way back to ETA Hoffman have described this in sexual terms. And as sexual violence. I mean, this is not new. I think what is new, is the idea of a woman saying this. If you had written this, everybody would go, whoo, well, well, really, really interesting. But it means that women are conscious during sexual acts. That they know that, you know, what these patterns are Like. I mean, it was taboo on so many levels that... you know, so, yeah, it all blew up. Do I regret having done that? I don't know. I mean, I guess I if I had known that this would probably appear on my gravestone, maybe I would have pulled back. I certainly didn't want that to be the only sentence I was ever known for. But no, I still agree with that. And so there it is.

Will Robin 44:38
You know, one of the things that struck me just now, and and it strikes me in your work, is that you really are very closely attached to the classical canon. I mean, you just described your Beethoven seminar as worshipful, which is, I think, not a word that a lot of even Beethoven scholars would necessarily use to describe their relationship to his music. How do you kind of navigate this deep, I guess lifelong love of, you know, the "Masters" with finding these ways to show that there's something else going on in this music that is often not talked about when we have these more kind of hagiographic accounts of what's going on?

Susan McClary 45:16
Well, as I said, at the root of all of the new musicology is how to open musical texts up to cultural meanings. Some of those meanings are great, some of them, I mean, they all participate in a misogynist culture. You know, it's not that this composer made this stuff up out of nothing. These are all energies, these are all ideas that are prevalent in the literature of the time, nobody's making it up. These are cultural texts. And they have both the most wonderful things that our culture has ever produced, and also, some of the most pernicious, and, you know, this doesn't mean we then censor, we don't deal with this music anymore. We pay attention to the ways in which these things are being

negotiated within the music. And that to me, makes them much, much richer. I wouldn't go back in a heartbeat to let's just lock all of that stuff out and label the chords. I mean, you know, I mean, this, it's way too important to do that. So when you're dealing with how music is constructing models of subjectivity, subjectivity is always contradictory, as these issues that are being worked out, and that just makes the music more and more fascinating to my mind. You don't say, oh, here's some sexism, let's throw this over in the heap. Yeah, it's sexist, so is all the literature of the time. So what? Let's move on, and deal with other issues.

Will Robin 47:28
What was it like for you? I mean, it's, it was so striking to me that two of your books from the 2000s are your dissertation kind of many, many decades later? What did it mean to actually finally get to go back and do that work and not face these rejections? And also know that you had established yourself as almost -- seemingly a scholar of different topics, although obviously, that's all kind of part of one big idea.

Susan McClary 47:54
Right. Well, you know, I finally had the credentials that allowed me to say, this is really what I want to do. I had just published with California, my Block lectures, Conventional Wisdom, which is, to my mind, maybe my best book, nobody pays any attention to it.

Will Robin 48:17
I read, I just read it. I reread it, I should say, I enjoyed it. very much enjoyed it. Yeah.

Susan McClary 48:24
But so then Mary Francis, who was the editor there, said, well, so you know, what would you like to do for us next? And so I said, well, now I would like to do my dissertation. [both laugh]

Will Robin 48:38
Book 1, normally...

Susan McClary 48:39
Yeah! Like she she sort of gulped... ok. I mean, she was assuming that I had become scandalous enough that people would even read my modal analysis. You know, these books haven't been great sellers. But people who have worked their way through Modal Subjectivities, and Desire and Pleasure have benefited from them, I think,

Will Robin 49:06
Yeah, I enjoyed reading them.

Susan McClary 49:08
But that is where it started. And as, you know, as we've talked today, whether it's Beethoven or Laurie Anderson, or any of the things I dealt with, I'm always dealing with this issue of temporality, and how notes are just being shoved around in ways to produce the experience, one experience of time or another experience of time. And why does that change over time. That's, that's incredible. You know, I

mean, why in the 1970s did Philip Glass seem really radical, and now his music underlies all the soundtracks that we have? What happened between the 1970s and now that makes that into a lingua franca? That's incredible? I mean, that's what we need to be thinking about, is how musics get put together at first at resistance patterns. He was resisting serialism and many things. And how does that then become the way we understand our emotions so thoroughly that Hollywood will hire him -- or somebody who is a pseudo Philip Glass -- to do that music for soundtracks? That's an amazing development.

Will Robin 50:41
Yeah. I mean, going back to the beginning of you sitting at the piano and playing Stradella or Monteverdi, like what is -- when you latch on to a new piece of music that you want to figure out, like, what is your listening process? Is it always at the piano? How do you kind of end up generating your analysis? Is there like a Susan McClary listening approach that you recommend?

Susan McClary 51:08
Not really. I mean, when I realize that I don't understand a kind of music, I will just play it until I think that I have made some kind of sense of it. The only other time I ever did anything like that deep dive into losing my ability to speak, was when I decided that I really needed to come to terms with 17th century French music, which didn't make any sense to me at all. Not at all. And I finally decided I couldn't stand going through history survey yet one more time, and when we hit Froberger, and I go, Oh, God, you know, this doesn't make any sense. But here it is. And, you know, I read a lot of people, and even people who specialized in 17th century French harpsichord music said, well, it's actually kind of slight, and it doesn't do anything, that there were people who liked it, you know, and I think, Oh, God, you know, this is pathetic, how do you devote your whole life to something that you don't know how to make sense of. So I guess, I decided that I would do a deep dive and I would just sit and play, it turns out, Chambonnières, these little dances that are, like 12 measures long, over and over until I could make some kind of sense of them. My husband, Rob Walser, had to live through this, you know, as I was doodling around and trying to figure out how to make sense of this. And you know, and once again, it was an issue of temporality. French music wants you always to be in the moment. If you think of any of that music in Bach terms, it all fails, because it's not going anywhere. It's again, like what I was dealing with with Janika Vanderwelde in that piece, right? It doesn't go anywhere. Well, then what is it doing? And what it's doing is figuring out how to make you attach to every moment, as though it is the most blissful, single moment you ever existed in. But then you have to go to the next moment. And that's also amazing. And then the next moment. You cannot think of, you know, no, no, no, this is where it's going. It's not going anywhere. It is getting you into the moment, and then that moment, and then that one. Once you start playing it and hearing it that way, then suddenly, it's so rich, and it's so unlike any other kind of Baroque music, it's not Italian, it's not German, it is ... you know, it is based on a completely different set of priorities. So that was my other deep dive. And it was ...I mean, I understand that saying, I play until it makes sense to me, how subjective that sounds. But if it doesn't make sense to me, I'm certainly not going to be able to play ... to perform it, or talk about it, or do anything else. So how do I make sense of this? Once I have a ... you know, a sense of how this works, then I start doing research. You know, I mean, this is so backward from everything that everybody is taught. But I started saying, okay, does anybody else in France at this time, does anybody talk about this? And it turns out, yeah, they do. They talk about -- in philosophy and in theology -- of never thinking

about tomorrow, always, you know, just treasuring today, treasuring this moment. The court of Louis the 14th was based on pleasures being given to you one by one. Don't think about the future, don't foment revolution, you know, just always be there in the moment. And that turns out to be the ways that everybody is talking about other dimensions of culture and structures of feeling in the 17th century in France, which is radically different from anyplace else.

Will Robin 56:03
Yeah. Well, thank you so much. This was really fantastic. And I really enjoyed it, and I learned a lot.

Susan McClary 56:10
Okay, that's it?

Will Robin 56:11
That's it. Thank you.

Susan McClary 56:13
Okay. It was really fun talking to you.

Will Robin 56:23
Susan McClary is the Fynette H. Kulas Professor of Music and Head of Musicology at Case Western Reserve University, and I'm deeply grateful to her for that great conversation. If you're new to the podcast, you can check out our previous season on Apple podcasts, Stitcher, Spotify, or wherever you're listening to this and on our website soundexpertise.org, which also has links to some of Professor McClary's work. My intrepid producer D. Edward Davis has returned for season two. And as always, I'm thankful to him for his great editing and awesome theme music, you can check out more of his work as a composer on SoundCloud, at warmsilence. If you want to share any thoughts or questions about today's show, you can tweet at me @seatedovation. I would also be remiss if I did not do a quick self plug for my new book, _Industry: Bang on a Can and New Music in the Marketplace_, which is out now with Oxford University Press. More info on that is at Williamrobin.com/industry. We've got a spectacular lineup of interviews for season two of Sound Expertise over the next few months. And I hope you keep tuning in. We drop new episodes on Tuesdays. And you can check back in next week for my conversation with musicologist Braxton Shelley about the poetics of black gospel music. It's gonna be a really good episode. Thanks for listening.

57:45
[music]