Pianosexual: Fascinations of Tori Amos's sexualized virtuosity in performance

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In: M. M. Marin, M. Knoche, & R. Parncutt (Eds.)
Proceedings of the First International Conference of Students of Systematic Musicology (SysMus08)

Background. Best known for straddling the piano bench and singing lyrics such as “I crucify myself everyday,” there is much more to American singer-songwriter Tori Amos than meets the ear. Trained as a classical pianist, she performs within a hybrid genre that fuses her classical piano training and popular alternative rock. Amos’s style of performance functions aesthetically as a type of performative self-created authenticity that aims to subvert women’s traditional roles at the keyboard to emphasize female sexuality. Her music greatly impacted society in the 1990s due to her emotionally intense lyrics that reflect her social commentary on issues such as feminism, religion, rape, and sexuality, while boasting a cult-like fan base similar to many of the virtuosos of the nineteenth century.

Aims. Drawing upon an interdisciplinary methodology including gender studies, cultural studies, aesthetics, philosophy, and the reception of Amos within the popular press, I aim to highlight not only Amos’s physical virtuosity, but to demonstrate the ways in which her pianism and vocal style have subverted the role of the female singer-songwriter in popular culture. Often criticized for her manner of playing, I position Amos as a pianosexual performer who uses the piano as an extension of her body and physically manipulates her Bösendorfer as a form of social commentary and musical activism, creating and performing her songs with a libidinal fervor.

Main Contribution. Amos’s pianistic virtuosity and technical facility alongside her sexualized physicality in performance separate her from most women singer-songwriters who play the piano. She performs with a sexualized athleticism akin to the virtuosic “fascinations” literary theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht describes in In Praise of Athletic Beauty. Additionally, I consult Richard Leppert’s The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body and his essay “Cultural Contradiction, Idolatry, and the Piano Virtuoso: Franz Liszt” in James Parakilas’s Piano Roles: Three Hundred Years of Life With the Piano to consider Amos as a current analog of the nineteenth-century tradition.

Implications. Through the survey of piano virtuosity from the nineteenth century, particularly that of women, Amos’s sexualized performance style is noteworthy in regards to gender, aesthetics, and cultural critique. As Amos performs her gender and her instrument in new and exciting ways within a popular genre of American music, it allows musicologists to redefine the concept of virtuosity and ways to map this virtuosity onto music not easily categorized within a single genre. Additionally, I hope this research provides new ways for examining the relationships of performing the body within music.

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press, I aim to highlight not only Amos’s physical virtuosity, but to demonstrate the ways in which her pianism and vocal style have subverted the role of the female singer-songwriter in popular culture. She performs with a sexualized athleticism akin to literary theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s virtuosic “fascinations” he describes in In Praise of Athletic Beauty. Gumbrecht defines fascinations as something the eye is “attracted to, indeed paralyzed by, [and] the appeal of something perceived.” Often criticized for her manner of playing, I position Amos as a pianosexual performer who uses the piano as an extension of her body and physically manipulates her Bösendorfer as a form of social commentary and musical activism, creating and performing her songs with a libidinal fervor.

Background

Born Myra Ellen Amos in 1963, she taught herself piano by ear and began composing songs by age three. At five years old, she secured a full scholarship to the Peabody Preparatory Division, the youngest student to ever be accepted. During her time at Peabody, she wanted to play her own music, but the faculty did not want that, so they denied her scholarship renewal in 1971. Accompanied by her pastor father, she began to play Baltimore gay bars at age thirteen. She also performed extensively in musical theatre, singing roles in high school and community theatre. In 1983, Amos recorded her demo “Baltimore,” which received local airplay and then moved to Los Angeles, where she joined a hair band called Y Kant Tori Read before embarking upon a solo career. As Amos crafted her new, acoustic solo songs, she performed using a distinctive style of physical pianism and vocality that contribute to her status as an alternative virtuoso.

Gumbrecht defines performance as “any kind of body movement seen from a perspective of presence.” Defining the virtuoso proves problematic, particularly in the world of popular music. Many similarities can be made between Amos, Franz Liszt, and Sigmund Thalberg in terms of virtuosity; however, that is not my main intention. I would like to situate Amos in her own category as an alternative-rock virtuoso. Richard Leppert asserts,

The virtuoso was a troublesome paradox: he was the literal embodiment of extreme individuality, but one that can risk the exceeding demands of bourgeois decorum, reserve, and respectability... For some—those carried away—the sublime was experienced vicariously; others were convinced they were simply being taken to the cleaners. Either way, the virtuoso’s performance at once realized art while staging personal identity as spectacle.

Amos’s background as a child prodigy and a lounge pianist/singer contribute to her unique performance style and the personal identity Leppert claims as the hallmark of a virtuoso. Her use of improvisatory piano breaks added in live performance reinforces the cultivation of the superhuman pianist, especially within a non-conservatory atmosphere. Additionally, her wide vocal range, use of register shifts and dynamics contribute to her virtuosity, not only as a pianist but also as a vocalist.

Pianistic Virtuosity and Technique

Many virtuoso instrumentalists claim a particular physicality within their performance as their trademark of showmanship. For example, Thalberg created the three-handed technique of pianism, while Liszt became known for essentially mauling the keyboard. Liberace offers a more recent display of showmanship, complete with candelabras, ruffles, and rhinestones and playing popular tunes such as “Chopsticks” and Broadway show tunes in a Lisztian manner, full of embellishment and sparkle. While Amos does not elaborate her own works to this degree, she created a specialized physical style of performance in which she straddles the corner of the piano bench not only to face her audience but to have a wider range of motion in her piano playing. There is another practical reason for this as she often needs to switch positions between a piano and a harpsichord, Fender, or Rhodes (or a combination of the two), and to have
access to the boom microphone on the other instrument to amplify her voice. Bonnie Gordon describes her performance style:

She straddles the piano chair and twists her body to face the audience. By sitting at the piano with her legs wide open to direct not only her voice, but her genitals at the audience, she violates the protocols of basic girliness that demands closed legs. At the same time, this arresting style works against the classical tradition in which she received her first training—a tradition that her experiments with the piano styles and harpsichord playing suggest she has not abandoned.ix

Beginning with her *American Doll Posse* tour in 2007, Amos began to perform with what she calls the “spread-eagle technique,” where she straddles the bench fully facing the audience so that each hand can access either a piano or keyboard that she may play simultaneously.x

**Physicality and sexuality in performance**

Prior to the spread-eagle pose, Amos’s bench straddling fell under scrutiny in the popular press. Greg Rule’s 1992 *Keyboard Magazine* interview depicts Amos’s performance as onstage masturbation, “Alone, centerstage, she slings a mane of red hair and she writhes masterfully toward a double-encore climax. . . . Just one woman, one piano, and a solitary shaft of the white light. This is music at its stripped-down, unpretentious best (emphasis mine).”xii Similarly, Karen Schomer’s 1993 *New York Times* review uses gendered discourse to describe Amos’s singing as sexual intercourse, “Every intake of breath as an audible hiss, and she quivered and tensed as though she were on the brink of some sexual implosion. Suddenly she broke: ‘ee-yi-yi-yi-yi-yl!’ She screamed again and again, then as the song ended she buckled and groaned with exhaustion. . . . Her songs had rhythms and dynamics as impetuous as mood shifts: long pauses as she sucked on one single word, whispers spiraling into squeals.”xii Jon Pareles’s 1996 *New York Times* review of Amos evokes nineteenth century gendered criticism of the adolescent female pianist. He also discusses the role emotionalism plays for her fans: “For her fans, Ms. Amos’s voice carries so much emotion that it’s convincing no matter what she’s murmuring about. But to those outside the cult, Ms. Amos seems to be following up her most self-indulgent impulses, using musical skill to shore up ever-increasing pretensions. . . . Some private thoughts need work before going public.”xiii Pareles continues his dislike for Amos’s cryptic lyricism in a 1998 review and calls her the “Sybil of songwriting.” One extremely interesting point Pareles mentions is the paradoxical nature of Amos’s fan base and the growing presence of the fans on the internet.xiv Reviewers typically chastise Amos, not only for her overtly sexualized performances, but also for her self-indulgence through enigmatic and elliptical lyrics and the ways in which they position controversial topics such as sexuality, religion, and abuse. The choice of Amos’s musical and lyrical topoi serves her performance style in the engagement and performativity of her physical body.

An example of this type of her sexualized performance can be seen in the live version of “Cornflake Girl” from her 1996 concert tour promoting the album *Boys for Pele.*xv In this performance she incorporates her standard straddling of the piano bench and an introductory interpretive dance during the guitar riff. During the song, Amos fully engages with her instrument and it becomes an extension of herself as she gyrates on the bench, kicks the air, swivels her hips, and smacks the air with her hand between the rests in the music. She becomes most animated during the keyboard break at 3:40 through the end and actually stands up and plays for large sections of the song. This visual example of Amos’s performance offers an opportunity to investigate Gumbrecht’s athletic fascinations and the ways they overlap with virtuosity in musical performance.

**Gumbrecht’s Athletic “Fascinations”**

Gumbrecht poses seven athletic fascinations that center on issues surrounding the body, suffering, grace, tools, forms, plays, and timing. To explore these issues, Amos’s performance of “Caught a Lite Sneeze” from the 1997 RAINN Benefit Concert offers a way to consider her piano (and vocal) sexual performance style as it relates to these seven
aesthetics. I interpret Amos’s physical engagement with her pianist body and vocal mechanism under Gumbrecht’s category of body as a performative enactment of gender subversion and empowerment. The concept of suffering occurs in the use of her bodily and vocal contortions and her ability to sustain herself physically and vocally on extremely lengthy concert tours. In Amos’s performance, the aesthetics of grace navigate between mechanical and expressive elements, while her tools (keyboards, electronic amplification, et cetera) enhance her talents. Through the manipulation of forms, Amos consistently subverts audience expectations. Her “plays” offer a balance of precision and expressivity and her use of timing creates a captivating “in the zone” experience for viewers who can lose themselves in virtuosic engagement with her music. This combination of Amos’s body, technique, talent, and expression create an aesthetic delight for the senses.

Gumbrecht’s assessment of the body is of extreme importance in mapping his fascinations onto Amos’s live performances. In The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body, Richard Leppert claims,

The body is a sight, in essence a sight of sights. It is also a site, a physical presence that is biologically empowered to see at the same time it is being seen. The body is a terrain, a land, as it were, both familiar and foreign; as such it can be mapped. The geography of the body has both topography and interiority, surface and depth, and all its levels are meaningful. The body, simultaneously site, sight, and possessing sight, is an object of tactile sensation and an aural phenomenon. . . . The body is a sight and a sound . . . the body is sighted and hears; the body sees and makes audible. Amos’s style of performing links athleticism and spectator-object voyeuristic fetish, which is evidenced by Amos’s sexualized piano technique (straddling the bench) and the amount of physical energy used to engage with her instrument and produce enough diaphragmatic support to sing well. Gumbrecht’s use of Judith Butler’s theory of performativity and the concept of gender construction as body transformation is at work within this clip. Amos performs her gender subversively by emphasizing her sexuality (and her status as a sexual victim of rape), which artistically empowers her and positions her on an equal playing field with men so she may be taken seriously as a rock artist.

Amos’s “suffering” occurs in the display of various bodily, pianistic, and vocal contortions. On sustained notes, she often engages in facial contortions, which highlight the physical or emotional association with the lyrics being sung. For example, at three minutes into the clip on the lyrics, “girl zone,” Amos “bites” the word with an aggressive glottal in the throat accompanied by sharp jaw motion. She also exhibits bodily contortion by navigating both the piano and harpsichord and interestingly transforms her body and the piano into her own percussion section at 5:22 in the clip. Her role as a vocal virtuoso is also of importance in the consideration of vocal wear and tear as she embarks on international tours, performing in different cities six nights a week for nine months without a vacation, often playing two and a half hour concerts without intermission. Additionally, in “ Caught a Lite Sneeze,” suffering becomes intertwined with this issue as the viewer questions how long she can sustain the held note on “zone” at 5:55 as she is moving around between keyboards and adjusting microphones.

In his book, Gumbrecht explains Heinrich von Kleist’s understanding of grace from his 1810 essay “Über das Marionettentheatre” as “belonging to the realm of the mechanical arts” and including a proper, effortless technique and execution that affect elements of mechanical yet expressive piano technique. The mechanical fugal accompaniment in “ Caught a Lite Sneeze” embodies this issue of proper technique and execution. If Amos were to perform completely within the style of classical pianism, much of her expressive freedom (particularly that of the body and her performativity) would be removed. And while the repetitive Baroque-style accompaniment displays Amos’s technical mastery as a classically-trained pianist, much of her grace, or Gumbrecht’s conception of grace, stems from the possibility of “channeling” or “possession” during performance, which she
demonstrates quite frequently in this video through her actively engaged facial expressions. In her performances, Amos uses the piano (and all variety of the keyboards she plays) as bodily extension or what Gumbrecht calls “tools,” similar to his description of cars and horses in the realm of sports. Also important in Amos’s performances are the use of technology and her acknowledgement of microphone amplification of her voice and the piano. This extends her talents beyond the human limits of capability, especially in regards to volume control. Technology also enables Amos to enhance her natural talent through various synthesizer, looping, instrumentation, and pedal options on the keyboard and different microphone effects including echo and reverberation.

Through Gumbrecht’s forms Amos subverts audience expectations, especially in her use of the harpsichord, piano, and herself as percussion instruments in “Caught a Lite Sneeze.” Additionally, her performance technique and body position on the piano, body movements during piano articulation, and moments of interpretive dance all serve to subvert what people expect to see in a rock concert, and perhaps that of audience members who had not previously seen Amos live. She also takes risks with her fan base during her live performances, often changing the arrangement and structure of songs, adding new instrumentation, lyrics, dance breaks, introductions and codas, and most often, long improvisatory sections with or without added vocals. This disables fans from singing along until they are absolutely sure of what they are hearing, thus focusing all the attention back on the performer as virtuoso and keeping her in control. Total control over the form reinforces Amos’s role in self-created authenticity she has as a singer-songwriter as a form of Kenneth Hamilton’s concept of fidelity. No matter how she changes the musical elements that make up her performance, she is not only the performer of these actions, but the author, and thus retains the fidelity of the text.

I would like to extend this concept of Amos’s self-created authenticity in performance in relation to Gumbrecht’s idea of “plays” in sports. These new and often spontaneous changes including additional lyrics, movement or dance, phrase extension, or additions of long improvisatory material add to her balance of precision and expressivity. This clip includes several instances of added material; however, the second half of the video particularly demonstrate the ways in which the extension of musical phrases heightens the organicism in contrast to the recorded version of Boys for Pele. This element of self-created authenticity further positions Amos as a virtuoso to her fans. The idea of witnessing an “authentic” performance that will include several embellishments of her standard hits, as well as new physical “tricks,” appeals to the fans and creates a draw for the many fans that see the same concert tour in several cities.

Amos’s tendency to get “in the zone” during performances perhaps explains a good deal of her popularity among fans. Her ability to “lose herself” while playing and singing is similar to Gumbrecht’s view of the zone within sports, “Athletes [or musical virtuosos in this case] know that, at decisive moments in competition, the flux of time seems to be suspended—or at least enormously dilated. This is the meaning of (interestingly enough) the spatial metaphor ‘being in the zone’ that some athletes use for a specific time-related dimension of experience.” Amos’s facial expressions, as seen in the video clip, illustrate her physical and mental focus of the zone. Additionally, Gumbrecht’s considerations of timing focus on the attack, which in Amos’s case manifests through her manner of aggressive pianism, use of hand-percussion, vocal attacks and glottal stops, and physical movements such as pelvic thrusts.

Performativity and Sexualized Virtuosity

Amos’s sexualized physical movements serve a dual function. Critics and fans viewed virtuosos such as Paganini and Liszt as warriors and heroes to foreground their masculinity and sexual prowess. Similarly, Amos’s fans, like those of Paganini, Liszt, and Led Zeppelin’s Robert Plant, describe her performance style as both sexual and violent. Interestingly, when critics describe Amos’s playing, they often use overly sexualized
discourse to place her within a male sphere and frequently describe her “domination” over the piano. While Amos is not the first woman in music history to subvert women’s roles within classical or popular music, she is one of the first to be so very celebrated for it. Gordon describes Amos’s role in this trend, “She participated in what might be called the women’s rock revolution of the early 1990s, rising to prominence within a cohort of women whose in-your-face style turned female sexuality into something confrontational, challenging normative conception and portrayals of female sexuality and identity.” The categorization of Amos in the popular press as a powerful or masculinized woman does little to capture her musical talent; however, it does highlight Butler’s ideas surrounding performativity and performing one’s own gender. In the journalistic construction of Amos, she performs masculinity during her concerts. While some of her performances may be aggressive, this is not to say that a great deal of her music is what critics often construe as “clit-rock” or hyperfeminine. Leppert describes the “musical gaze” in tandem with the consumption of music as “supercharged with sexuality, producing an ‘interest’ simultaneously encoded with pleasure and anxiety.” Amos is both musical sight and sound in her sexualized performances, both factors of which are highly marketed to her audiences.

Fandom

Amos enjoys cult-like fandom similar to many virtuosos of the nineteenth century. In Piano Roles, Leppert notes, “Audience fascination with virtuoso performers at concerts at solo recitals in the nineteenth century closely paralleled with, even exceeded, that which accorded popular music performers today. Niccolò Paganini on the violin and Franz Liszt on the piano set the standard: praised and damned, worshipped and ridiculed, both claimed a public attention that bordered on fetishism.” Like Amos, “Liszt was heard—Liszt—as he himself clearly recognized—was also very much ‘looked at.’ . . . Performances were sometimes described as being watched, not simply heard.”

While boasting many loyal fans, Amos also bears a similarity to virtuosic figures such as Paganini and Liszt and contemporary piano rockers such as Billy Joel and Elton John due to her aggressive or masculinized performance techniques. While she has been described as dominating the piano, the style and poetic sensitivity of her lyrics often verge upon hyper-femininity. In this sense, Amos performs both her masculinity and femininity in performance. In her performativity of both masculine and feminine, Amos is able to subvert traditional gender roles at the piano. Due to her deviant virtuosity, she escaped from the domestic and subordinate codes established in the 1700s and performs the body into her pianosexual virtuosity.

Acknowledgments. I would like to thank Dr. Jonathan Kregor for offering a seminar on virtuosity and for his insight on the initial stages of this paper.

Appendix

Amos’s Physical Performance Style

Figure 1. Typical performance pose, straddling piano bench [Image from http://hereinmyhead.com]

Figure 2. “Spread-eagle” performance pose, centered between two keyboards [Image from http://resonatormag.com]
References


YouTube Links:


"Tori Amos Live Caught a Lite Sneeze." [http://youtube.com/watch?v=o1oAcF3WY6g]. (Accessed 20 April 2008).


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Gumbrecht, 167–68.

xvi Gordon, 189.

xvii Leppert, *The Sight of Sound*, 64.


xix Leppert, 255.

xix Butler.


xx Gumbrecht, 167–68.

xxi Ibid., 175.


xxiv Gumbrecht, 196.

xxvii Leppert, “Cultural Contradiction,” 278–79.

xxvi Gordon, 189.

xxviii Leppert, *The Sight of Sound*, 64.


xxix Leppert, 255.