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Abstract

This paper explores Rebecca Clarke’s Viola Sonata (1919) through the experience of a lesbian relationship—a relationship that extends from the Sonata as experienced by a violist and scholar, to Clarke herself as a performer and composer. Inspired by the work of Suzanne Cusick, I examine the musical elements of the Viola Sonata that invite and enable a lesbian relationship in the music. Such elements include existence outside the phallic economy, porous ego boundaries, and a fluid positioning within the power/pleasure/intimacy triad. A central theme of Clarke’s compositional style is embodiment, which furthers the potential for a lesbian experience of the Viola Sonata through “body-aware” and performer-centric techniques. The poetic inscription for the Sonata, lines from Alfred de Musset’s “La nuit de mai,” serves to further construct a musical narrative of embodiment through the relationship of Poet and Muse. Without claiming that Clarke was a lesbian, this paper sheds light on the Viola Sonata by considering the relationships between performer, composer, and listener in a lesbian musical analysis.

Keywords

Rebecca Clarke, Viola Sonata, viola, Suzanne Cusick, lesbian, embodiment, body-aware, performer-centric, female composer

**“Oppressed by Sensual Delight”:
On a Lesbian Relationship with Rebecca Clarke’s
Viola Sonata¹**

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With its idiomatic writing, evocative timbres, and imaginative trajectory, Rebecca Clarke’s *Viola Sonata* (1919) asserted the viola as a virtuosic solo instrument and seduced its way into the canon of twentieth-century viola repertoire. Inscribed with lines from Alfred de Musset’s poem “*La nuit de mai*,” the viola’s seductive quality can be interpreted as a register for the voice of the Muse, calling to the Poet to “take up [their] lute” in the face of profoundly sensual inspiration.² The alignment of the Muse with female inspiration and the viola as Clarke’s voice has garnered gendered interpretations of the

¹ Special thanks go to Dr. Kirsten Yri for her additional feedback and guidance on this paper, as well as her ongoing support of my work.

² The inscription on the *Viola Sonata*, lines 34-35 of the poem by Musset, reads: “*Poète, prends ton luth; le vin de la jeunesse/ Fermente cette nuit dans les veines de Dieu*,” which translates to “Poet, take up your lute; the wine of youth/ Ferments tonight in the veins of God.”

Sonata in which Clarke's involvement as a violist and composer is viewed as carving out a distinctly female space in a male-dominated musical society. Clarke's intimate knowledge of the viola's technical intricacies and expressive potential accounts for an embodied, performer-centric musical style that invites an active relationship between performer, composer, and listener in the act of musical creation. Clarke's musical language also invites and enables for the listener, performer, and scholar a lesbian relationship with her Viola Sonata. This experience aligns with Suzanne Cusick's definition of a lesbian relationship with music; such a relationship involves existence outside of the phallic economy, demonstration of porous ego boundaries, and fluid positioning within the power/pleasure/intimacy triad.³ Without claiming that Clarke herself was a lesbian, this paper will explore the musical implications of a lesbian relationship in the Rebecca Clarke Viola Sonata.

On a Lesbian Relationship with Rebecca Clarke (1886-1979)⁴

It is worth stating that the purpose of this paper is not to claim that Clarke intentionally infused her Viola Sonata with a coded message of lesbianism, nor is it to reveal a hidden aspect of

³ Suzanne Cusick, "On a Lesbian Relationship with Music: A Serious Effort Not to Think Straight," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, 2nd Edition., eds. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 73.

⁴ This heading pays homage to Suzanne Cusick's "On a Lesbian Relationship with Music," which is central to both the exploration in this paper and to my own framework as a lesbian musicologist and musician. Thank you, Suzanne.

Clarke's sexual identity. Instead, situating Clarke's work and career within the framework offered by Cusick's definition of a lesbian helps in recognizing the musical factors that contribute to the potential for an experience of a lesbian relationship between the performer, listener, composer, and Viola Sonata.

In theory and in practice, a lesbian is someone who exists outside of the "phallic economy"—that is, someone unburdened by the pressures of patriarchal society. For those perceived as women, the pressures of the phallic economy are primarily associated with procreation, subservience, and domestic duties.⁵ Clarke's career and relationship choices can be seen as existing outside of the phallic economy. After Clarke was thrown out of her home by her overbearing father in her early twenties, she lived an independent, successful career as a composer, violist, and chamber musician, thus eschewing the patriarchal pressures of domesticity and subservience.⁶ It was only during her retirement that Clarke married pianist, composer, and teacher James Friskin.⁷ However, Clarke's marriage does not signify a renunciation of feminist ideals.⁸ In fact, it does quite the opposite; her late coming to marriage at age 58 exempted her from the traditional wifely duty of childbearing, and instead allowed the relationship to offer her companionship during the later years of her life. Numerous scholars speculate about the reasons behind Clarke's

⁵ Cusick, "On a Lesbian Relationship with Music," 72-73. For more on the phallic economy, see Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

⁶ Nancy B. Reich, "Rebecca Clarke: An Uncommon Woman," in *A Rebecca Clarke Reader*, ed. Liane Curtis (Waltham: Rebecca Clarke Society, 2005), 11.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Laura Seddon, *British Women Composers and Instrumental Chamber Music in the Early Twentieth Century* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2013), 29.

withdrawal from musical engagement around this time, scraping together claims to suppose that her marriage was the cause for her artistic abandonment.⁹ It is worth noting that this discussion would surely not be held in reference to any male composers or performers in Clarke's time or ours. Clarke's successful career as a composer, violist, and chamber musician at the turn of the twentieth century is to be celebrated, regardless of duration or level of historical recognition.

Clarke's identity as a composer, violist, and performer also aligns with the "porous ego boundaries" that Cusick suggests of lesbian relationships and that allow for a free flow between roles of power or non-power which are not otherwise enabled by a fixed, individuated sense of self.¹⁰ In such porous relationships of

⁹ Clarke herself recognized this bothersome association and turned the tables on a male contemporary, Paul Hindemith. At a party, she coyly asked him if his lull in composing was due to being in love, to which he shockingly replied, "Oh no, I'm married!" Nancy Uscher, "Violist to Violist: Nancy Uscher's Interview with Rebecca Clarke Friskin, April 11, 1978," in *A Rebecca Clarke Reader*, ed. Liane Curtis (Waltham: Rebecca Clarke Society, 2005), 194-95.

¹⁰ Cusick, "On a Lesbian Relationship with Music," 72. "I *think* loving a woman triggers that escape [from the phallic economy] more easily than loving a man (and trying to create an 'escaped' relationship with him) because of how women are socialized, or, in more updated language, because of who the construct 'woman' is: she is non-dominating; she has (we are told by psychoanalysts) porous ego boundaries ... She is non-power: to be in love with her is to be in love with, to be fascinated by, to be drawn to that which is non-power. With her, a self who is also non-power is more likely to create a relationship based on non-power—that is, a relationship in which a porous boundary exists at all moments between the she who seems to have the power and the she who doesn't, allowing for a flow of power in both directions."

non-power, “no one in the relationship has been formed to be the power figure, although all can play at it.”¹¹ In this way, Clarke’s musical identities are not fixed or competing against each other; instead, the porous shift between the roles of composer and performer allow her greater freedom and advantage in developing her career and establishing her musical voice in both professional and private settings. Additionally, as composition was not her primary income source, Clarke had more artistic freedom to explore genres and styles that reflected her interests and experiences.

Marcia Citron’s work explores how the historical restriction of musical training and music-making contexts for women impacted their exploration of particular genres and styles; she notes how unequal access to education explains women’s gravitation toward more intimate genres like songs and chamber works instead of large-scale genres like sonatas and symphonies, which were explored freely by their male counterparts.¹² Intimate genres provided women with access to a musical space in which

¹¹ Cusick, “On a Lesbian Relationship with Music,” 72.

¹² Marcia J. Citron, “Feminist Approaches to Musicology,” in *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music*, eds. Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 22-23. “A central component of the metaphysical concerns the transcendence of the composer as subject. This situates attention on the ego, on a very strong, sometimes exaggerated notion of self, and it formed a basis for the influential cult of genius that Beethoven and his worshippers perpetuated. The mythology elevated the individuated composer above everyday concerns and tangible reality. On this view the composer’s ego intruded on the art work. Women composers, however, seldom injected a strong sense of ego into the art work. Many, in fact, had difficulty placing themselves in positive juxtaposition with their compositions, not to mention dominating it with an individuated self.”

to perform their own works, thus engaging directly with the embodiment of their own voices and allowing them to explore their voices in a non-confrontational, non-competitive domain.¹³ Clarke herself mainly composed music that she and her peers could play, which accounts for an ample catalogue of single-movement violin and viola pieces, duets for viola and cello, and vocal pieces with piano or string accompaniment. Because Clarke was one of the first women to study composition at the Royal College of Music—beginning study in 1907 with Sir Charles Villiers Stanford—it cannot be argued that she lacked the skill or instruction necessary to compose large-scale works.¹⁴ However, Clarke seemed to prefer the genre of character piece above all. She wrote fifteen character pieces in comparison with only three sonatas, including the Viola Sonata, which were composed for specific purposes.¹⁵

Clarke composed the Viola Sonata in 1919 as a submission for the Berkshire Chamber Music Festival, which was founded and funded by Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, an avid patron of the arts and supporter of chamber music. Coolidge encouraged Clarke to submit a piece to the festival's competition, which required submissions to be either a sonata or a suite; Clarke chose to explore the sonata form. Some scholars speculate that this

¹³ Citron, "Feminist Approaches," 18, 19, 22.

¹⁴ Seddon, *British Women Composers*, 27; Carlynn Heather Savot, "Rebecca Clarke's Sonata for Viola and Piano: Analytical Perspectives from Feminist Theory" (DMA diss., University of Connecticut, 2011), 27.

¹⁵ This number is approximated through assessment of the complete list of Clarke's compositions on rebeccaclarkecomposer.com. There is room for confusion with the exact number of works that can be labelled as character pieces because Clarke often transcribed and recycled musical materials to be played on different instruments.

choice of genre was an attempt to “mask” her gender through her selection of a “serious” form, thus increasing her chances of success.¹⁶ It is more likely, however, that Clarke sought to expand her compositional domain to portray the viola as a serious and virtuosic solo instrument through sonata form, rather than to prove the legitimacy of her own career or compositional abilities. This intention is reflected in the program notes that she wrote for the Sonata for its concert premiere in 1919, in which she states her desire to present the viola as “an effective solo instrument,” a role for which it had so often been neglected and for which she knew its potential so intimately.¹⁷ As will be explored in this paper, even within a traditionally masculine genre like the sonata, Clarke’s voice as a composer, violist, and performer is palpable through her thematic, formal, and technical choices, with the porous boundaries between her musical roles allowing her to circulate freely in positions of power.

Cusick’s notion of lesbian relationships includes the freedom to exchange roles and form identity through one’s positioning in the “power/pleasure/intimacy triad.”¹⁸ Power, pleasure, and intimacy are central to sexuality, whereby relationships of intimacy are enacted through giving and receiving pleasure.¹⁹ Relationships are based on distributions of power, in

¹⁶ Savot, “Rebecca Clarke’s Sonata for Viola and Piano,” 55. “By participating anonymously in competitions and writing music in a traditional format, one she didn’t normally use, Clarke counted on ‘presumed straightness’ (or rather ‘presumed maleness’) to be considered competitive.”

¹⁷ Rebecca Clarke, programme notes as quoted in “Bauer and Bailly Play New Sonata,” *Springfield Daily Republican*, September 26, 1919, Springfield Republican Archives.

¹⁸ Cusick, “On a Lesbian Relationship with Music,” 71.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

which women are often in the position of “non-power,” both within and without heterosexual relationships.²⁰ When women come together in lesbian relationships, Cusick proposes that they do not fall into the traditional model of power and non-power, and instead construct a relationship that operates outside of the power dynamic of domination and submission.²¹ Considering the dynamics embedded in the roles of composer and performer, it serves to mention that Clarke’s own freedom to inhabit these roles allowed her to subvert the binary opposition of power. Free from the need to define oneself in opposition to another, being a lesbian, according to Cusick, is “a way of organizing the force field of power, pleasure, and intimacy that refuses the simple binary opposition male and female.”²² This binary opposition is central to gendered readings of sonata form as outlined by scholars including Marcia Citron and Susan McClary, and has been manipulated by scholars like Robert Fink to account for same-sex readings of thematic treatment.²³

Gendered interpretations of sonata form rely on stereotypical semiotic codes of masculine and feminine characteristics as depicted in the Western classical music tradition. Noting how commonly perceived “masculine” elements like melodic ascent, strong accents, and dotted “militaristic” rhythms typically triumph over “feminine” elements like melodic

²⁰ Cusick, “On a Lesbian Relationship with Music,” 72.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 73.

²³ See works including: Citron, “Feminist Approaches”; Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); and, Robert Fink, “Desire, Repression and Brahms’s First Symphony,” in *Music/Ideology: Resisting the Aesthetic*, ed. Adam Krims (Amsterdam: G&B Arts International, 1998).

descent, chromaticism, and hushed dynamics, McClary notes that the traditional sonata trajectory operates on the basis of domination and submission in an ultimate attempt to eradicate the feminine.²⁴ Based on its thematic pervasion and tonal hegemony, Citron proposes that a sonata's first theme is intended to affirm "the presence of the male composer as the main compositional subject of the movement," thus asserting masculinity and the implied masculine voice of the composition.²⁵ On the other hand, thematic material that is overtly similar and contains little stylistic contrast offers, according to Fink, a same-sex reading of first and second themes.²⁶ A same-sex reading opens up the potential to discuss lesbian musical relationships based on how composers enact, subvert, or transform the behaviour of discursively gendered thematic elements. An overview of the gendered implications of sonata form helps to illuminate Clarke's manipulation of the genre in the Viola Sonata, especially through her subversion of binary opposition in the first movement of the Sonata.

First Movement: Subverting Domination and Submission

The viola opens the first movement with a dotted eighth-note motive spanning a perfect fifth, setting up a tone of power and declamation, which is followed by rhapsodic flourishes that promote a sense of mythical improvisation and thematic ambiguity. The suggestion of action and power contained in this opening gesture, however, does not lead to a dominating first

²⁴ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 68-69.

²⁵ Citron, "Feminist Approaches," 21.

²⁶ Fink, "Desire, Repression and Brahms's First Symphony," 269.

theme, but rather to theme groups that draw on the musical gestures of downward motion and chromatic descent, which are typically perceived as feminine due to their implied passivity and threat to the overall tonal framework.²⁷ The presence of complementary musical material for the first and second theme groups also subverts the gendered narrative of conflict: the first theme is spurred into self-conscious attempts to assert a masculine identity, creating internal conflict instead of competition between themes.

The first theme contains an internal conflict of identity, as witnessed through thematic instability and motivic irregularity within the first theme itself, as the theme is based upon breathless attempts at ascent toward an ultimately thwarted arrival. Contextualized by McClary's statement that a masculine theme is traditionally concerned with "thrust," "closure," and identity retention, the struggle in Clarke's first theme to achieve a definitively triumphant arrival further undermines its assuredness of a potentially masculine identity.²⁸ Measure-long *crescendos* and *subito pianos* distinguish each failed attempt, resulting in irregular five-measure phrases as seen in Figure 1.

²⁷ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 71.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

Figure 1: mm.13-17. End of irregular phrase length noted by breath mark. All musical figures are adapted from Rebecca Clarke, *Sonata for Viola and Piano* (London: Chester Music Limited, 1991).

The breath mark that signals the end of the phrase ushers in the second half of the first theme, which is still based upon the gesture of falling and climbing. Though more outward in expression due to a more sustained dynamic range, an overall higher register, and more marked and separate articulations, the second half of this theme arrives on the highest pitch reached by the viola thus far. However, this arrival is undermined by the dotted motive in the piano part (Figure 2a), which weakens the potential to hear the arrival's finality by harkening back to the opening of the Sonata. Succumbing to the original motion of descent in measure 31, the viola comes to land on declamatory repetitions of a climbing eighth-note motive whose own *fortissimo*

arrival is thwarted by a sudden *pianissimo* drop in the piano in measure 37 (Figure 2b). Figure 2 shows both attempted arrivals.

Figure 2a: mm.31-32. Dotted rhythm in piano triggers viola's melodic descent.

Figure 2b: mm.36-37. *Subito pianissimo* in piano part undermines arrival of final viola chord.

Here, at the end of the first theme, the texture becomes muddled through the piano's simultaneous triplet and eighth-note motion, which ushers in the velvety and sumptuous second theme.

The second theme fully embodies its expected characteristics of languor, seduction, and voluptuousness without the internal struggle or resistance that was found in the first theme. Laden with descending chromaticism, the piano introduces the second theme in measure 39, marked *langoroso* to draw out the languid quality of each phrase, as seen in Figure 3.

string, punctuated by quarter rests, gives the impression that the second theme dissolves or disintegrates into the lowest sonority on the viola. This gesture blurs directly into the return of the improvisatory flourishes that open the development section, seamlessly ironing the boundaries between formal sections in the Sonata. Figure 4 shows the dissolution of the second theme.

Figure 4: mm.72-75. Second theme dissolving into fragments.

Ultimately, the intermingling of feminine musical characteristics across the two theme groups creates the impression of porous ego boundaries because neither theme is entirely distinct in its musical characteristics, thus erasing the need for competition. By exploring both the first and second themes within conceptions of what traditionally constitutes a feminine theme, Clarke succeeds at creating a relationship between themes that invites feelings of exploration, evolution, and thematic equality within the first movement of the Sonata. The fluid ability of each theme to command power or be subsumed in the musical texture transitions away from fixed

thematic notions of domination or submission. Such lack of conflict between themes, and such heightened internal conflict within the first theme itself, leads the listener to question whether the first and second themes are two distinct female voices or, instead, two sides of the same voice.

Introducing the Voice of the Composer

Reading both first and second themes as two sides of the same voice is a view shared by Carlynn Heather Savot, who interprets this fluid relationship as depicting a narrative of process and transformation, instead of conflict, and considers this trajectory to be the product of a distinctly female identity.²⁹ Savot's view may very well draw its inspiration from Citron's consideration that the first theme of a sonata could affirm and assert the identity of the composer as the main subject of the movement.³⁰ Fink, in an analysis of Brahms's First Symphony, suggests that the lack of a distinct second theme in the first movement of the symphony reveals that the struggle for what is deemed as "sexual control" is not between a man and a woman, but within "one male psyche, divided against itself."³¹ In the case of Clarke's Viola Sonata, the blending of thematic characteristics in the feminine realm invites consideration of a female voice, and advocates for a musical experience that evades the "presumed straightness" of sonata form.³²

²⁹ Savot, "Rebecca Clarke's Sonata for Viola and Piano," 24.

³⁰ Citron, "Feminist Approaches," 21.

³¹ Fink, "Desire, Repression and Brahms's First Symphony," 269.

³² Wayne Koestenbaum, "Queering the Pitch: A Posy of Definitions and Impersonations," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, eds.

The absence of conflict between the two themes in the Viola Sonata could be interpreted as exploring a world in which female identity is powerful and respected on its own terms without being heard as a threat or needing to be controlled. Clarke's themes can be said to exist outside of the phallic economy of traditional sonata form, though they are not necessarily exempt from patriarchal pressures. The struggle within the first theme itself, as it "plays at" being a masculine theme within the form of a feminine theme, suggests a conflict of identity and social perception.³³ The first theme attempts to assert its expected power and control over the thematic framework of the movement, but is confined by an overall form whose power and presence is not allowed to inhabit the same musical space as would be afforded to a theme of purely masculine characteristics. In the opening of the Sonata, Clarke sets the precedent for integrating seemingly disparate musical elements within one formal structure; thus, the centrality and pervasiveness of what is often deemed the "introductory" material in the Sonata further challenges a reading of the first and second themes as two distinct entities.

Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 1994), 1. "May music escape, for good, the fate of presumed straightness. May music at last be subject to the critic's seduction."

³³ Cusick, "On a Lesbian Relationship with Music," 72. This idea of "playing at" being something comes from Cusick's explanation of the role of power in the power/pleasure/intimacy triad. She says: "No one in the relationship has been formed to be the power figure, although all can play at it." This description accounts for a reading of the first theme as still being a feminine theme, hence the lack of struggle between the first and second themes, regardless of the potential interpretation of masculine elements in the theme.

As previously established, considering the Sonata's opening in relation with succeeding thematic material allows for an acceptance of unity across the first movement, which foreshadows the interconnectedness of the Sonata as a whole. It is only the improvisatory character of the following rhapsodic viola lines that distinguish this material from the beginning of the first theme in measure 13. However, the first theme can be seen as an extension and extrapolation of the opening material, as the tonal centre of the first theme is only a semitone lower than the tonal centre of the opening material; this close intervallic proximity further strengthens their connection and relationship. Figure 5 shows this close relationship of pitch centres as the opening material slips into the first theme, with the E $\flat$ 5 continuing as a shadow of the repeated E5.

Figure 5: mm.12-13. Semitone relationship between the opening material and the first theme.

Indeed, to the listener, this infamous opening is itself thematic, as it provides instant recognition of the Sonata, more so than colloquial reference to the first theme.³⁴ The listener's experience in interpreting the form of this movement demonstrates the lesbian experience of fluid roles in the power/pleasure/intimacy triad, reflected in the equally fluid roles of this material. The positioning of this opening material throughout the first and third movements of the Sonata also demonstrates a blurring of the musical boundaries within the form itself, contributing to a sense of overt motivic unity across the Sonata as a whole. Next, consideration will be given to how the poetic inscription of the Sonata impacts a narrative reading of its trajectory, strengthening the assertion that both the dotted and rhapsodic motives are central in a holistic analysis of musical materials.

Poetic Narrative: Poet and Muse

While Savot asserts that the function of this "introduction" is simply to identify the dotted rhythm and whole tone motion that is central to the remainder of this movement, thus serving a "rhetorical purpose,"³⁵ I propose that this

³⁴ See works including Donald Macleod, "The Famous Viola Sonata: Rebecca Clarke (1886-1979)," BBC Composer of the Week, May 30, 2017, 1:00:00, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08rg35f>; and Cait Miller, "#Declassified: Rebecca Clarke and the Viola Sonata at 100," Library of Congress, August 2, 2019, YouTube video, 1:10:04, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GSxDGMDF2bc>.

³⁵ Savot, "Rebecca Clarke's Sonata for Viola and Piano," 21. "Despite the unusual prominence of the material, the opening section must be considered

introduction establishes the poetic narrative insinuated by Clarke's inclusion of the Musset inscription on the score. The inscription features the voice of the archetypal feminine Muse calling to the Poet to express her desire for artistic consummation as inspired by the coming of spring.³⁶ While there is no indication that the Musset poem was the inspiration behind the Viola Sonata, Clarke's insistence on including it with the published score in 1921 indicates her recognition of the two works' similarities and influences. It therefore seems an appropriate framework to consider the musical implications behind the poetic inscription. The dotted motive of the viola, as seen in Figure 6, can be heard as the Muse's call to action, while the quasi-improvisatory line that follows in Figure 7 can be heard as the creative flourishes resulting from the Muse's sensual power playing through the Poet's lute strings before a solid melody or artistic figure is established.

introductory, rather than the main theme itself, because the rhetorical purpose is presented so clearly."

³⁶ See footnote 1.

Figure 6: mm.1-2. Dotted opening viola motive.

Figure 7: mm.5-6. Quasi-improvisatory, rhapsodic viola flourishes.

The Sonata's entire trajectory is a quest for an embodied, artistic consummation, as will be further explored through this material's recurrence in the third movement. Especially significant is the light that this inscription sheds on an

interpretation of the Viola Sonata as an embodied work. Instead of subscribing to the traditional realm of “autonomous art,” both Clarke’s selection of poetic lines and her musical narrative encompass the physical act of creation in the human process of composition; thus, the work demystifies and increases the visibility of the female artistic voice.³⁷ This exploration of embodiment tracing the feminine act of creation is further signalled to the listener through the dispersive ending of the first movement, one whose veiled sonic timbre and sparse texture signals to the listener that the poetic narrative established by the first movement is not yet complete. This ending supports the free flow of power and porous ego boundaries between composer, performer, and listener. Here, Clarke’s writing blurs the ending of the first movement with the beginning of the third movement while still managing to envelop and integrate the character-piece-style interruption of the second movement.

Second Movement: Virtuosity as Embodied Intimacy

Recalling Citron’s note that women “seemed to crave the potential for their own involvement or literal embodiment” in musical communication rooted in performance, it is no surprise that Clarke composed the second movement of the Viola Sonata in the style of a character piece.³⁸ Aligning in style with Clarke’s output of short pieces with evocative titles, this movement propels the performer and the listener out of the mystical

³⁷ For an overview of the conception of autonomous art, see: David Beard and Kenneth Gloag, *Musicology: The Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 20-22; and McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 67.

³⁸ Citron, “Feminist Approaches,” 22.

ambience of the first movement and into a circus-like atmosphere created through the use of extended viola techniques. Through *pizzicato* chords, harmonics, and *glissandi*, the second movement of this sonata is “at once idiomatic and purposefully awkward,” showcasing all the timbral possibilities of the viola.³⁹ This intricate style reveals Clarke’s intimate understanding of the viola from a performer’s perspective, and is similar in style to her 1916 composition “Grotesque” for viola and cello, which is another performer-centric work.⁴⁰ This compositional context also exemplifies the porous boundaries between performer and composer and accounts for what is known as Clarke’s “body-aware approach” to writing for the viola.⁴¹ Figure 8 highlights some of the extended techniques and body-aware compositional elements that can be found within the second movement.

Figure 8a: mm.18-19. Extended techniques: double-stop harmonics.

³⁹ Savot, “Rebecca Clarke’s Sonata for Viola and Piano,” 33.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Figure 8b: mm.23-25. Extended techniques: *pizzicato* chords.

Figure 8c: mm.29-32. Body-aware compositional approach: Leaping from C and G strings to high harmonic double stops on D and A strings; rapid switching of articulations from *legato* to *staccato*.

In challenging the expectations of listener and performer through the insertion of a virtuosic character piece into a sonata, and by interrupting the established narrative of Poet and Muse through a whimsical, “freakish”⁴² display of extended techniques, Clarke’s decision to write the viola part as “muted throughout”⁴³

⁴² “Bauer and Bailly Play New Sonata.”

⁴³ Ibid.

offers a tangible glimpse into the experience of female composers and solo violists—two identities that have often been overlooked in their involvement in “serious” musical forms. Clarke writes that her intention behind the Sonata was to present the viola as “an effective solo instrument, in which light it has been so long neglected,” and in the second movement in particular “the technical resources of the viola are displayed to the utmost.”⁴⁴ Indeed, the virtuosity of the second movement is undeniable, which makes the decision to mute the viola all the more puzzling. Given Clarke’s statement, it would seem that the muted viola provides commentary on the overlooked status of the viola as a solo instrument, creating more than just a new sonic colour. Through the use of the mute alongside predominantly soft dynamics, (the majority of dynamics are marked *pianissimo* and *piano*), the listener is forced to question the virtuosic potential of the viola in a way that subverts the historically prominent power dynamics between the soloist and their instrument. The virtuosity of Clarke’s writing emphasizes the intimacy of relationships between performer, instrument, and listener. Instead of the audience witnessing the dazzling threat of the soloist “heroically” dominating their instrument through their technical prowess,⁴⁵ the whimsical mastery of Clarke’s second movement invites the listener into the reciprocal relationship between performer and instrument that is akin to explorations in the power/pleasure/intimacy triad.

⁴⁴ “Bauer and Bailly Play New Sonata.”

⁴⁵ Maiko Kawabata, “Virtuoso Codes of Violin Performance: Power, Military Heroism, and Gender (1789-1830),” *19th-Century Music* 28, no. 2 (2004), 91.

The body-aware elements of Clarke's compositional style are what distinguish mastery from control in the second movement, thereby suggesting embodiment as a key element of negotiating power, pleasure, and intimacy in the relationships between performer, instrument, and listener. As Maiko Kawabata suggests, "virtuosity is power," and it serves as an act of "social negotiation."⁴⁶ Instead of a negotiation involving domination over an instrument, Clarke's compositional negotiation ensures that the viola itself is actively present in the virtuosic encounter. The destabilizing aspect of leaping from the highest range to the lowest, flipping between *pizzicato* and *arco*, and switching between languid and disjunct musical motion confronts the performer with the boundaries, limitations, and possibilities of their physical form as engaged in the act of making music. There is a kind of voyeurism in the presence of the listener witnessing the performative exchange between player and instrument, suggesting the intimacy of the pleasurable scrambling of power between performer and instrument from the unusual, though not impossible, demands of the music. Through this orchestrated encounter with the body, the composer, performer, and listener alike find themselves in enmeshed experiences of power, pleasure, and intimacy as all enable, witness, and take part in the physical experience of musical creation.

⁴⁶ Kawabata, "Virtuoso Codes of Violin Performance," 92.

Third Movement: Musical Embodiment and the Power/Pleasure/Intimacy Triad

The trajectory of the third movement places embodiment at its core as the musical materials from the first movement to the third movement are repeated, expanded, and transformed through the body-aware compositional elements of the second movement. The third movement begins with a disembodied dance form, gradually using material from the first movement to reconnect with the physical act of artistic creation. While the first movement opens with the voice of the Muse, the third movement opens with the Poet's lone voice in the piano part, contemplating their creative task and suggesting a yet-to-be-embodied artistic form through the use of an erotic dance. Under the guise of an English folk song, the emphasis on the second beats of the triple-meter melody—created through longer note durations, dynamic swells, and marked accents—point to the sarabande.

Figure 9: mm.1-4. Opening sarabande melody in piano with notated emphasis on second beats.

As seen in Figure 9, the austere treatment of the sarabande melody suggests disembodiment and the foreignness of sensual exploration, as the solo melody is not yet fleshed out with full harmonies and textural or rhythmic interplay.⁴⁷

The sarabande adds an exotic flavour of Otherness to the piece, functioning as a marker of “eros and seduction.”⁴⁸ The “imagined eroticism” of the sarabande is based on its projection of the male gaze onto a female dancing body.⁴⁹ In this case, with only one musical line present, the clear diatonic writing of the piano’s sarabande serves as a female compositional exploration free from the male gaze and the phallic economy, and it invites collaboration with the equal voice of the viola. The viola enters with its own iteration of the sarabande melody in measure 9, which, in contrast to the disembodied nature of the opening solo melody, signifies an induction into the realm of the physical. According to Rose Pruiksmā, part of the “appeal and voluptuousness” of the sarabande lies in the “fluid relationship between the stable rhythms and regular phrasing of the music and the dancer’s ability to move against them.”⁵⁰ In measure 24, triplets overtake the earlier eighth-note accompaniment of the piano, providing a fluid sense of rhythmic displacement that the viola has the chance to “move against,” as seen in Figure 10.

⁴⁷ Rose Pruiksmā, “Of Dancing Girls and *Sarabandes*: Music, Dance, and Desire in Court Ballet, 1651-1669,” *The Journal of Musicology* 35, no. 2 (2018): 146.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 150.

Figure 10: mm.24-27. Sarabande melody in viola with triplet accompaniment.

The motion contained within the evolving rhythmic interaction of the melody and accompaniment is an apt register for embodiment, as it builds intensity and reaches closure through the insinuation of a physical form.

It is here in the third movement where unresolved musical ideas from the first movement are transformed through gradual embodiment. The porous boundaries between movements are made clear through dynamic musical interactions between piano and viola. Similar to the thwarted arrival of the first theme in the first movement (Figure 2a), the third movement builds in registral intensity before a sudden descent and pause in musical motion, this time returning to the hushed gyrations of the sarabande melody. Figure 11 compares the arrival pitch of D6 in both movements, through their descent to a common destination of D4. Although the rhythmic and melodic contours are related, note how in the third movement the increased sense of embodiment accounts for greater chromatic exploration in the triplet descent (Figure 11b). While the piano accompaniment to this descent in the third movement may look less embodied

through its relative stasis, the sustained chords over which the viola explores their *ad libitum* descent is reminiscent of the improvisatory flourishes in the opening of the first movement (Figure 7). This musical idea serves as the Muse's initial flirtatious instigation toward the artistic consummation of the third movement.

Figure 11a: First movement, mm.31-32.

Figure 11b: Third movement, mm.69-73.

The sarabande melody also dissolves toward the open C string like the first theme in the first movement; however, unlike the fragmented descent in the first movement, which sounds hesitant or dissociative (Figure 12a), the repetition and rumination in the third movement gives an impression of satiation and sonic fulfillment (Figure 12b).

Figure 12a: First movement, mm.72-79.

Figure 12b: Third movement, mm.86-94.

In both the first and third movements, the viola emerges from the open C statements with a *staccato* figure that builds in

intensity. In the first movement, this figure is a *pianissimo* foreshadowing of the melodic and rhythmic contours that are fleshed out in the third movement where this figure resembles a wild dance-like fling, complete with harmonic whistles reminiscent of the extended techniques pictured in the second movement (Figure 8). These similarities are captured in Figure 13.

Figure 13a: First movement, mm. 80-82.

Figure 13b: Third movement, mm. 136-38.

This fluid relationship of material between the first and third movements exemplifies the porous boundaries of a lesbian musical experience, with transformations of material inspired by an increased sense of embodiment. The wild, dance-like elements of Figure 13b derive from the body-aware elements of the second movement, demanding increased physicality on the viola through a wider melodic range and chordal interjections involving harmonics and spanning three strings, thus expanding and embodying the initial foreshadowing of the first movement idea in Figure 13a. Whether implied through melodic or rhythmic gestures, or overt in the sense of increased physicality and a body-aware compositional approach, the evolving embodiment across the Sonata's trajectory places the listener and performer in a lesbian relationship through fluid and reciprocal experiences of power, pleasure, and intimacy.

Pleasure is derived from the unsuspecting return of the viola's opening material in measure 102, serving as the ultimate point of climax in which the piano finally takes up the viola's signature motives that have demanded consummation since the beginning of the Sonata. Under the *sul ponticello* coaxing of the C string, a moment which is itself a transformation of the open C pulsations of the first movement, the piano's recollection of the sarabande melody in measure 94 quickly transforms into rhapsodic flourishes reminiscent of the viola's introduction in the first movement. These flourishes shift suddenly to take on the viola's introductory call to action, turning measure 102 into a *stretto*-like section whose power is drawn from the main melodic features of the first movement. The viola itself leaps into action in measure 113 with a return of the main motivic features of the first theme from the first movement, though this time at a

quickened pace. Cusick might call this the “who’s on top?” approach to melodic and motivic trade-off, where the mutual exchange of musical instigation reflects a lesbian experience of choice when engaging with power, pleasure, and intimacy.⁵¹

While this initial return nods to the significance of the first theme from the first movement, the third movement ultimately gives power to the dotted call to action motive that was seen as introductory in the first movement. The prevalence of this material in the third movement—its motivic exploration in different keys between measures 147 and 157 and its creation of momentum propelling the movement to its close in the *Agitato* section at measure 212—supports the recognition that what Savot deems as a merely rhetorical introduction has undeniable thematic impact on the overall trajectory of the Sonata. Thus, the traditionally insignificant motive is given pervasive power over the Sonata, reflecting an experience of fluid power dynamics while challenging notions of thematic hierarchy.

The fluid power dynamics and relational positioning that Cusick deems as markers of a lesbian experience also extend between the music and its listener, both in recognizing the embodied scrambling of power between the performer and their instrument and in flowing with the unpredictability of the cyclical thematic returns. The ultimate outcome is that of pleasure, with music being at times the lover, and at times the beloved, and often both simultaneously.⁵² Cusick’s suggestion of such an open

⁵¹ Cusick, “On a Lesbian Relationship with Music,” 74.

⁵² Ibid., 73-74. “If music might be for some of us, or for all of us sometimes, in the position sometimes called ‘significant other,’ then one might look for scrambling and shifting of roles with *it*, for funny power relationships with *it*, moments when *it* is the lover—that is, the active, pleasure-giving

listening position lets the music be the “active force that generates pleasure,” leading the performer and the listener into an intimacy that challenges the standard notion of musical experience as defined by controlled mastery, and instead allows the music a voice, and a life, of its own.⁵³

Conclusion

When reflecting on her own musical life, Clarke stated: “I don’t think I thought about it very much . . . I just wanted to *do* it.”⁵⁴ Clarke’s assuredness constructs an image that mirrors the creative and powerful voice of the Muse in the Viola Sonata. In the thematic material of the first movement, this voice is persistent and unconflicted in its trajectory; in the second movement, the power of virtuosity saturates the style of the character piece, inviting the performer and listener into a space free from patriarchal domination; and, in the third movement, the earlier material of the Sonata is transformed through embodied

partner—and moments when *it* is the beloved—the partner who somehow receives pleasure or empowerment.”

⁵³ Cusick, “On a Lesbian Relationship with Music,” 74, 76. “So, when I teach, I teach my own listening posture, one that seeks to restore a primal reception of music through a listening strategy of extreme attentiveness. And I admit I teach attentiveness rather than analysis as a listening strategy for gender-laden (‘sexuality’-laden?) reasons. For when I encourage students to receive music ‘on their backs,’ paying the closest of attention to what in the music gives them pleasure, I am conscious of doing so to allow the music her own voice (and to allow the students theirs), *her* own wholeness of utterance, before analytical or cultural-historical interrogation.”

⁵⁴ Robert Sherman, “Robert Sherman Interviews Rebecca about Herself,” in *A Rebecca Clarke Reader*, ed. Liane Curtis (Waltham: Rebecca Clarke Society, 2005), 171. Emphasis original to transcript.

self-actualization and artistic creation. Considering Clarke's own social position as a female composer and performer, the quest for an autonomous musical voice existing outside of male obligation is central to an understanding of her work. Regardless of whether Clarke sexually desired women, her uniquely female-centric voice in the Viola Sonata resonates with lesbian experiences of power, pleasure, and intimacy that exist outside of the phallic economy. This circulation of embodied pleasure is depicted through the Sonata's thematic journey, with the recurrence of the opening material serving as a reminder of the necessity of a full-bodied experience of making and sharing music. In this way, a lesbian relationship with the Viola Sonata as a listener, a performer, and a scholar means entering into an ever-shifting dance of power, pleasure, and intimacy with the voice of the Muse and engaging with a transformative experience of sensual delight.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ The title of this paper, "Oppressed by Sensual Delight," is drawn from the line of the Musset poem that immediately follows the lines with which Clarke chose to inscribe the Sonata. "La nuit de mai," lines 34-37: "Poet, take up your lute; the wine of youth/ Ferments tonight in the veins of God/ My breast is disturbed, oppressed by sensual delight;/ And the changing winds have set my lips on fire."

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