

Reflections upon the “genderization” of popular music professions – the Portuguese case

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Introduction

The popular music industry is, even today, in the 21st century, extremely “white and male oriented” as it was referred in the ARP conference held in Oslo in December 2014, during a panel with women producers and sound engineers. Despite the fact that changes seem to be taking place on a general level, in Portugal singing - whether solo, as singer-songwriter or as background vocalist – seems to be the most common activity for a woman in the music industry, together with administrative and support positions, as mentioned by Richard Burgess (2013:). Still, a small number of women instrument players are paving their way within the popular music milieu, in contrast with classical orchestras, where the number of women players is substantially higher. Technical functions like sound engineering and light design show an even worse imbalance, being almost exclusively performed by men.

This research aims to reflect upon the role of Portuguese women music professionals in the sphere of popular music as part of an Erasmus + three month traineeship in 2018 in cooperation with the University of Salamanca. My methodology, following ethnographic field-work principles, involved interviews with Portuguese women professionals who perform these functions, as well as brief inquiries to teachers of several music and technical schools around the country – Lisbon, Évora and Porto. I also used bibliographic sources. These include academic works focusing on women in sound engineering from a critical point of view (Smith 2009, Sandstrom 2000). Questions of education, career, job opportunities and working conditions are the main focus of this article. The subject of parenthood and family was also addressed.

An Iberian perspective? Maybe next time...

Sharing a geographic as well as a cultural proximity with Portugal, Spain seemed a good terrain to be able to understand the situation of women professionals in the music industry, trying to discover similar (or different) patterns of behavior from an institutional as well as a practice-based perspective. However, understanding Spain as a conglomerate of different cultures spread over a much larger area than the one occupied by Portugal (three times larger, approximately) made me soon realize the difficulty of this task in such a short period of time (three months). Nevertheless, it was suggested to me as a topic of future research the particular case of women in Galicia – the Spanish autonomous community closest to Portugal, situated in the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula. The existence of a matriarchal society in a predominantly male-dominated society as the Spanish seems to be – seemed a curious fact worth studying. The fact that, at that time (June 2018), the recently formed government had a majority of women was considered, as I heard in Salamanca, “a facade”.

Thoughts while driving to Salamanca

Traveling from Lisbon to Salamanca is best done by car (between four to five hours’ drive) rather than by bus or train (between seven to eleven hours, with stops included). As I was arriving to Salamanca on my first trip, I heard a radio talk-show where several invited guests (mostly women) were discussing women roles in Spanish society. A fantastic coincidence, almost an alignment of the Salamanca Gods, welcoming me in such a helpful way. In this talk, one of the interviewees (a woman) referred three tropes that, in her opinion, should endure significant changes in the future for a more gender-equalitarian society: distribution, representation and recogni-

tion. Another interviewee (a woman also) spoke of the binary opposition between the necessary and universal vs the contingent and the particular, the first pair of archetypes (necessary and universal) being associated to the male gender, while the second (contingent and particular) to the female gender. While listening to this interesting discussion, I began thinking about my professional life.

I started my career in the music industry at around 1982, just as I was finishing my university degree in Languages and Modern Literatures. A music lover since childhood, the decision of following a degree in Languages and Literatures came from the fact that in those days in Portugal there were very few educational options – particularly on the higher education level – for someone who loved music, but was not necessarily interested in learning music either according to the conservatory model, or in a jazz school.

From an almost exclusive women-populated subject area – The Humanities –, where 90% of my colleagues were female, as well as many of the teachers - the music world, generally speaking, seemed a much more varied place to be in terms of gender distribution. As most of my work was primarily developed within recording studios – as I was/am a session singer –, I usually worked with other women with whom I teamed in many recording sessions. The studio secretaries were usually women, as well as receptionists and administrative production assistants. The cleaning ladies, as the designation itself shows, were women. In all these decades as a studio professional, I only found two women sound engineers. Likewise, the number of women instrument players I came across – other than violin or viola players in classical orchestras, or occasionally a piano player – were practically none. Amidst the most popular and sought after Portuguese session players – from bass players, drummers, guitar players, keyboardists, brass sections – there was not one single woman, against several women session singers. Nor was there a woman producer, arranger or working as a label A&R (although recording label promoters were often women). As strange and unnatural as these facts might seem, they never really stroke me as odd, as throughout the years this reality was unconsciously assumed as something which was part of the recording scenario and assimilated as the “normal”.

The live music scene was not much different. Roadies, sound engineers, light designers, road managers were mostly men. According to my general observation, there are increasingly more women road managers and artist managers, functions which can easily be assembled under the “administrative and support positions” mentioned by Richard Burgess (*ibid.*). But regarding sound and light, the number of women is still scarce.

Sound engineering and light design: education and job opportunities

Sound engineering and light design are included in some Portuguese public universities, as well as private technical schools, an innovation regarding a not so remote past. In my doctoral research about what I named the Lisbon historical recording studios, the older generation of sound engineers, who were born between the 1920s and the 1940s (Hugo Ribeiro, José Fortes, Moreno Pinto, Alberto Nunes, Rui Remígio and others) either came from the radio or learned through experience, with occasional internships abroad. These professionals taught the next generation, born between the late 1950s and 1970s (Tó Pinheiro da Silva, Jorge Barata, João Pedro Castro), who, before having the opportunity of working behind a recording console, performed a number of necessary functions in a studio. This apprenticeship “mode” of learning the trade was difficult for women to access, not just in Portugal, but on a general level. As mentioned by Boden Sandstrom (2000), this usually began by “unloading and loading trucks as well as setting up the equipment” (*ibid.*:297). Although the Portuguese women sound engineers I interviewed stated to have carried weight when necessary, this feature seems to operate not only as a necessary stage within the profession but as an element of “natural” selection as well. Quoting Sandstrom again “it was much harder for women to receive hands-on experience as apprentices” (*ibid.*).¹ This resulted in women sound engineers usually coming from a more scientifically based basis of learning, “having to work more intelligently and from a broader base of knowledge” (*ibid.*).

With occasional exceptions of sound engineers having studied abroad (Fernando Abrantes), and again occasional internships abroad (often paid by themselves), these sound professionals (all men) did not have any other way of learning. Such is not the case presently, as several educational options are available. This fact, however, has not been enough to change the gender imbalance regarding both the number of enrolled women students in sound and, consequently, the job opportunities resulting from these courses.

Light design is a different matter. Regardless of the relation between the education offers and job opportunities being more or less direct, there seems to be more women operating lights than sound. Also, working conditions

¹ Although Sandstrom refers to women sound engineers in the 70s in the United States, this resonates with the statements made by both my interviewees.

within this function are apparently less aggressive in terms of gender discrimination, as the testimonies of my three interviewees seem to corroborate.

Case-studies – Anabela Gaspar, Maria João Castanheira e Suse Ribeiro

As stated previously, in my three and a half decades of work in the music industry in several contexts – recording studios, live, music theater, television, teaching – I have met (and worked with) two women sound engineers and one woman light designer. I conducted ethnographic interviews with two of these women: Maria João Castanheira (sound) and Anabela Gaspar (light). I was also able to conduct an interview with Suse Ribeiro, another Portuguese woman sound engineer that was suggested to me. The fact that most of this research was done during the summer was not helpful in terms of finding availability within some of these professionals.

The testimonies of these women alerted me to the fact that the number of women music professionals working in these functions is increasing, albeit in what seems to be a very slow motion.

I tried to formulate the same questions for the three women at stake; basically, questions around education, discrimination and job opportunities were the core of the interviews. However, since every informant is different from the other, I tried to select the most relevant ideas regarding the subject theme of this paper.

2.1 Anabela Gaspar

Anabela Gaspar, aged 53, is probably the most well-known woman Portuguese light designer operating in the music live scene; she was certainly one of the first to have this job. Her contact light design came up during college, when she was graduating to become a dance teacher at Faculdade de Motricidade Humana (Human Motricity Faculty). At the same time she was preparing her choreographies, she became aware of “another world”, equally creative, that could somehow help conveying the meanings constructed on stage. She nevertheless became a dance teacher. From this “small, controlled” world of dance choreographies where she learned the basics of light design, she went to work at Expo 98, a huge international exhibit which took place in Lisbon between May and September 1998, involving many artistic acts in the performative arts, from theater to music and street animation. It was there that she started having more contact with the music world, which she enjoyed, as well as working with more sophisticated light equipment. It was also a world where, at the time, she realized there was a lot of work, giving her the opportunity to choose light design instead of dance teaching as a profession.

Upon the question of discrimination, Anabela stated she loves the road and underlined her assertive character as a feature that somehow prevents discriminative acts. “I can ask for help if I need, but when I am certain of something I am very assertive”, she stated. Besides, on the road there is no time to waste on superfluous matters, so focusing on her job is the priority. “If anything happens around me, I think I won’t even notice it”. Mentioning the fact that she had never had any problems with the technical teams, she further added to have learned enormously about her profession with most of them. The feature where she feels a certain “subliminar” discriminative attitude is credit attribution. “It seems we always have to do more and better, and even when we actually do more and better, we have to prove we did, which is odd and unfair”, she stated. When part of a team, there is a tendency to more easily attribute credits to the male elements, generally speaking: “It seems we are a bit forgotten”, she said. Although she admitted to have no problems regarding the technical part of her work, she prefers the artistic and creative side of it, using color as a vehicle to convey emotions.

2.2 Maria João Castanheira

Maria João Castanheira, aged 53, revealed a somewhat different professional reality. Following the influence of her father, an electrical engineer and an audiophile who only listened to recordings by Deutsche Gramophone, she was taught to record “as a professional” by the age of nine, when all she ever wanted was “to record some cassettes to her friends”. At the age of thirteen, she was offered a professional DJ console by her father. She also studied piano at Instituto Gregoriano de Lisboa and would become a bachelor of Engineering and Telecommunications. By the time she entered a recording studio for the first time with her band *In Loco* to record their single, she “fell in love with everything” (ibid). She was 20 years old.

Upon the question of discrimination (both in the recording studio and on the road), the answer was fast and firm: “In Portugal, I never felt anything but discriminated” while “abroad I was accepted with enthusiasm”. After an internship at Abbey Rad, she was invited to stay there as Recording Assistant, with a remarkable salary and the possibility of becoming Main Engineer. She would decline the invitation, as “life as an emigrant” did not attract her (she travelled many years on the road with Roberto Leal, a Portuguese-Brazilian singer, whose performances were mostly for the Portuguese emigrant community around the world). She seemed quite certain upon the possibility of having more job opportunities if she was a man, but stated that there was not, in her opinion, any justification for this to be considered a “man’s job”. “In the old days, they would refer lack of strength from women, but that was never a valid reason for me. I carried as much weight as men did in many situations”. In the recording studio, she would add, this allegation has even less pertinence.

Castanheira’s testimony would show similarities with Gaspar’s regarding credit attribution. Referring a feeling of tiredness for the fact of having to prove her value constantly, she would also justify the apparent lack of interest from women in sound engineering by lack of trust in the job market of sound, something which, according to her, is different in the light design department. “I wonder why...I just don’t understand it!”, she would add.

2.3 Suse Ribeiro

Suse Ribeiro was the name mentioned by most sound engineers as an example of a woman sound engineer (apart from Maria Joao Castanheira). This consensus regarding her name has the double meaning of, on the one hand, accounting for her professional value; on the other, however, being the only woman mentioned – a fact she acknowledged during the interview with some regret – is a significant “symptom” of the situation of women sound engineers in Portugal. Even if there are more – as there probably are – they are simply “non-existent” as references in the working market and among their male colleagues.

This 35-year-old Portuguese woman from Leiria (a city around 150 kms from Lisbon) began her career in music from the age of 5, studying piano, followed by drums and afterwards classical percussion. Her well-grounded music education enabled her to become a music assistant in recordings, apart from sound engineer. She would later go to ESMAE, in Porto, where she graduated.

Upon the question of having more work in case she was a man, she answered a firm “of course”, adding this to be a fact instead of a mere opinion. “Not only more work, but other types of work, of job opportunities, of expectations”, Suse stated. Elaborating a bit further on this particular issue, at my request, she would point out the fact that competition between sound engineers is very frequent, particularly in the music live scene (“your doing that band and I’m not, your doing FOH and I’m doing stage monitors”). This feature, together with what she considers common features of these professionals’s personalities (which she admits to have as well) – usually proud, showing zeal towards the work, very frequently imposing their will – turns competition with a woman even a more complicated situation to handle. Sound engineers base their competition upon comparisons; when they are deprecated by other colleagues, and that colleague is a woman, indignation masked with a certain spite and jealousy may arise – “well well, look at that one...”. She was quite surprised to recognize this same attitude with colleagues recently arrived at the job. She highlighted persistence as a trait a woman in this profession must have on top of the normal difficulties it involves, and resilience.

Unlike lights, sound is, according to Suse, still predominantly associated to men. Because of this, her efforts to be validated in the profession involved, in the beginning of her career, getting severely injured in her back for carrying weights. She also mentioned the question of power, related to the way some sound professionals (namely, the owners of the PA companies) address her, using the noun “darling” – placing her “exactly where they want her to be”.

Expectations regarding a woman in this job are much higher, according to Suse, particularly in critical situations. Also, a special care must be taken regarding questions of speech use, as it is understood differently when you are a woman – even a simple “no” to something must be justified, scrutinized...Responses to technical raiders written by her were given as an example of a differentiated professional treatment.

For years, she chose the most unfeminine clothes, annulling her feminine side – like a “potato bag” – a defensive strategy to better mingle in a working environment mostly populated by men. As will be mentioned later, she referred the fact of not having children, a subject I will develop more extensively on the conclusions. Despite everything said, she admitted to like working with men, because both approaches complement each other.

Conclusions

My first preliminary conclusion is that there is not a direct relation between the more prolific and varied educational offer regarding these professions and the amount of both women students and professionals in the actual job market. Plus, it is interesting to verify that, although sound engineering seems to be more well represented in the educational market than light design, there are more women interested (and actually working) in light than in sound. Another conclusion one may easily draw is, in the case of sound, the very few women who actually exercise this profession have a scientific and academic knowledge which is often superior to most men in the job market. As Andreas Wetherhead, recording engineer, states

“I had to learn in the academic sense as opposed to the “hands-on hang around the guys” sense . I’m glad I learned from books because my knowledge is more firmly based” (Sandstrom 2000:297).

In the case of *María Joao Castanheira* and *Suse Ribeiro*, apart from their technical knowledge, they are trained musicians with many years of music education, both theoretical and practical. As much as this feature may constitute an added value for a sound engineer, the truth is the majority of first and second generation male Portuguese sound professionals don’t have it. This does not turn them into worse professionals, nor the opposite is necessarily true (sound engineers who are musicians being better professionals). What it obviously means is, as stated by my interviewees, a woman has to “do more and better”(Anabela Gaspar) and “in a more intelligent way” (*Suse Ribeiro*).

The question of loading and unloading sound gear as referred by all the women sound professionals brings the issue of physical power to the debate. However, the real issue has to do with power in its broadest sense, the physical part being just an obvious (and not always accurate) “crutch” in which discriminatory arguments are based upon. As Sandstrom (2000) mentions,

“in exploring sound engineering as a gendered field, it is important to say that the primary issue is power; all other issues are simply aspects of power” (ibid:290).

Besides the power to turn accessibility to the profession hard to overcome, there is also the power to transform your expectations in life as a woman in order to survive in the business when you manage to “get in”. I would like to address a subject which was only mentioned by *Suse Ribeiro* as something with discussion value (although it was not part of my questions): parenthood. *Anabela Gaspar* presented it as a fact (“I don’t have any children”), *María Joao Castanheira* did not mention it at all. *Suse* presented it as something she has postponed so far, but which due to her age (35 to 36, “when the biological clock starts ticking”, in her words) is becoming more of a subject of reflection. I do not consider it an obligation for women in any profession to embrace parenthood; however, the fact is in certain professions (like the ones we are dealing with presently), the mere thought of it must bring all sorts of fears. Having my own case in mind (I have three children), I worked through the whole of my three pregnancies, and started working immediately after giving birth. With the exception of my third child, after which birth I was forced by doctors to stay at home recovering from a surgical problem, my thoughts were always to return to work as soon as possible to make sure nobody would replace me while I was away. This caused me great anxiety whenever I was at home being a mother of my recently born children, which was exactly what I was supposed to be then - and nothing else. My work was not, however, a “menace” to any man. As we have seen through *Suse Ribeiro*’s words, competition from a woman in the sound world is almost taken as an insult by male competitors. Thus, the power to undermine aspects that may be of value for a woman is also engaged in these professions. The majority of male sound engineers I know have children and manage to have a family life of some sort mostly due to their wives, who usually don’t work in the music business (they may not live with their children’s mother, but that is a different subject). As far as I know, this fact was never the cause for lost professional opportunities. In the case of a woman sound engineer (or light designer, I would imagine), it almost certainly would involve many difficult professional choices and a complex logistic plan, with family support or other. It is as though these professions “kill” the woman in you in its most complete sense – or at least leave a part of your being in a sort of “things to (eventually) do one day” drawer which you will probably forget about. Or, even worse, pretend you do.

Like Sandstrom, *Diane Marie Smith* (2009) defends the idea that “technology is gendered” and “the more complex the technology, the more likely it is to be gendered masculine” (ibid: 10–11). It is not my place to consider the level of complexity of one technical function over the other (assuming, for instance, sound engineering to be more complex than light engineering), but again referring *Smith*, to “question the language used to talk about

[these activities], wondering how much it helps to maintain the gender imbalance” may be of some use for further reflexion.

Regarding light, the idea of the “visual”, involving colour, embellishment, creating therefore a web of visible emotions (as Anabela Gaspar’s words revealed), is perhaps (my hypothesis) more consciously or unconsciously associated to the feminine, to creativity, whereas sound is, as we have seen, more associated to power.

“The issue of power [...] is of vital importance to the study of sound engineering. (...) Sound engineers are in the position, alongside musicians and sometimes producers, to shape musical meaning and construct truth. In this, they exercise power”(Smith 2009: 14).

Although one can sense power tensions in the light design activity, accounting for Gaspar’s words about credit attribution to women in large teams, sound and light seem to be gendered differently.

Let us return to my first trip to Salamanca and the radio show where the role of women in Spanish society was being discussed. The three tropes mentioned by one of the speakers – distribution, representation, recognition – are clearly unbalanced in these music-related professions. Women are unevenly distributed, poorly represented and hardly recognized. They still represent the the “contingent” and the “particular”. The “exception” in its fullest sense: on the negative side, because they are very few, on the positive because they tend to be exceptionally well prepared, both musically and technically, coming from a more structured and well-grounded educational background (often, the only way they have to get into the industry).

The role of women in music along western music history is still understudied. The role of women in these specific technical professions associated to music (sound engineering and light design) has only just begun. This is an on-going research, like the one about women instrument players which constitutes the second part of this work. Many interesting perspectives were left behind - for instance, the specificity (if there is any) of the input of women in these areas. Is there a female/feminin “sound”? Or a female/feminin “look”? What are its features? In the words of Carmen and Eulalia Gil about the essays that constitute the book “Arte y Mujer”(2009):

“Beyond building with their voices, bodies, music, nature, textualities, visual arts, Internet and cinema their own aesthetic look on the world [the authors and authors of this volume] have developed a critical vision about the society that has contributed actively to the changes around them” (ibid: 10 – a.t).

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