I Feel Pretty: Using Discretization to Unpack Gender Disparity in Musical Theatre - A Study of Leonard Bernstein's West Side Story

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Abstract : Gender disparity can be found in the representation of the female characters in Leonard Bernstein's musical West Side Story. As a postmodern composer, Bernstein was open about his social activism, yet did not consider his compositional portrayal of female characters as part of that activism. Using discretization as an analysis tool, this thesis explores the melodic contours of male and female songs in West Side Story to show differences in complexity between male and female characterisation. The analysis explores the intervallic relationship between the vocal line and melodic color in relation to the accompaniment harmony, taking into consideration the use of consonance and dissonance. West Side Story is commonly known for its distinct use of the tritone motif and its inherent dissonance. It is evident when reviewing the findings of this study that there is a distinct disparity between male-led and female-led music. The male-led numbers consistently adhere to a dissonant aesthetic with the tritone motif implemented in all of the extracted songs. By contrast, the female songs remain consonant with simple intervallic movements. By examining the results of this study through the lens of Equality Feminism, this thesis finds that Bernstein has simplified the characterisations of the female leads. The thesis further proposes that without cognisant consideration of the compositional portrayal of women, the musical theatre will continue to reinforce gender stereotypes, as evident through this study of Bernstein's West Side Story.
Keywords : music theatre, gender bias, composition, Leonard Bernstein
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