

Suze Terwisscha van Scheltinga

5575605

Bachelor Thesis

7 April 2018

Dr. Petra Philipsen

7441 words

It takes a society

Interactions with dominant discourses on Esperanza Spalding's *Chamber Music Society*

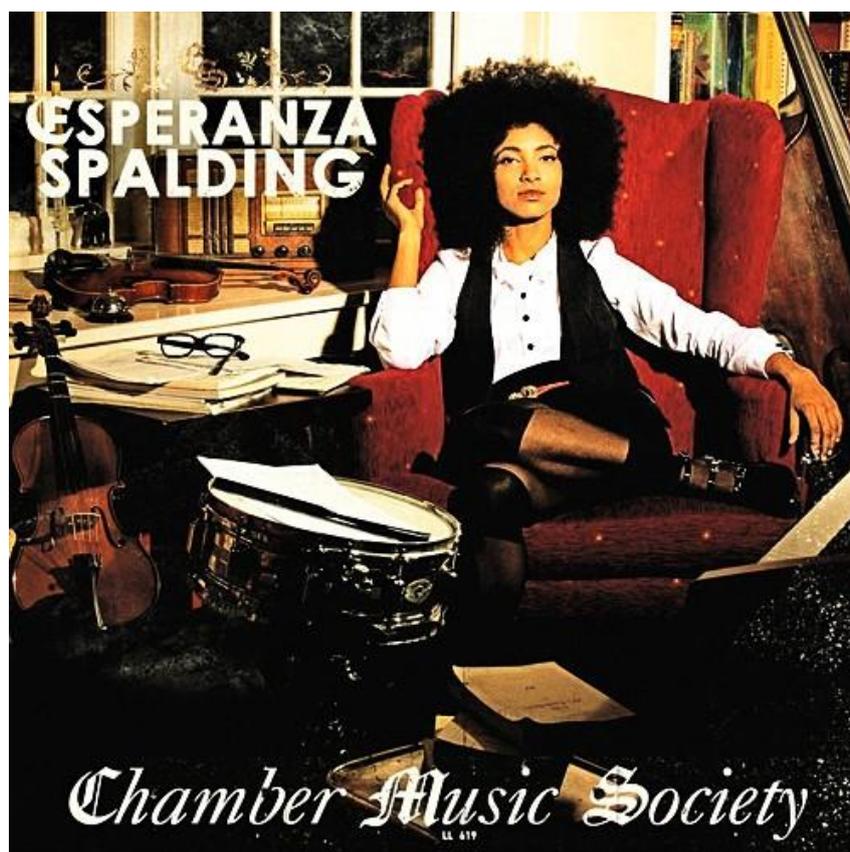


Table of contents

Introduction	p. 2
Chamber music and jazz: ideas and definitions	p. 4
1.1 Defining ‘chamber music’	p. 4
1.2 Talking about chamber music and jazz: dominant discourses	p. 5
Testing the theories: the promotion and reception of <i>Chamber Music Society</i>	p. 9
2.1 “This is something serious!”: Spalding and critics on <i>Chamber Music Society</i>	p. 9
2.2 On ethnicity, gender and genius	p. 10
A musical analysis of <i>Chamber Music Society</i>	p. 13
3.1 <i>Chamber Music Society</i> : a general overview	p. 13
3.2 Analysing ‘Knowledge of Good and Evil’	p. 14
Conclusion	p. 21
References	p. 23

Abstract:

In 2010, jazz musician Esperanza Spalding released an album with the title *Chamber Music Society*. On this album, Spalding alludes both musically and conceptually to an idea of chamber music that got its recognizable shape in the nineteenth century with the canonization of classical repertoire, while still delivering a product that can be classified as ‘jazz’. Thus, Spalding positions herself within both discourses. Three issues feature prominently in these discourses that are particularly interesting because of Spalding’s position and background: the issues of ethnicity, gender and creative genius. While Spalding reinforces several elements of the idea of chamber music in her interviews, on issues of ethnicity, gender and genius she mostly does not comply to stereotypes (although some critics assessing her musicianship do). The elements of chamber music that were not addressed in written sources can be found in the music itself. Therefore, while Spalding confirms the dominant idea of chamber music musically, she challenges other ideas linked to chamber music and jazz discourse in statements concerning her musicianship.

Introduction

In 2010, 26-year old bassist and vocalist Esperanza Spalding released her third album *Chamber Music Society*, an attempt to blend chamber music with jazz and to bring together Spalding's background in classical music as a violinist with her more recent ventures in jazz. With *Chamber Music Society*, Spalding set out to recreate her own experiences with playing chamber music within a jazz idiom. The 'society' she refers to in the title of her album stands for the group of people playing music together: music made for and among friends, sharing in an experience of creating new sounds and new works of music.

However, during this research I found myself investigating another interpretation of the term 'society' instrumental in the creation and reception of Spalding's album. When talking about terms like chamber music and jazz, the first and almost unavoidable question is: how to define said terms? These concepts shift in meaning and interpretation over time. What can be retraced, however, is how such a meaning or interpretation comes into existence and why it becomes a part of dominant discourse. This is what I set out to do in my thesis: investigate how these general ideas influence people creating new works such as this album *and* how they shape people's reception of it. In other words, how a concept is defined and recreated by society. I think it is important to be aware of the way we use terms and concepts, both in everyday life and in academical spheres. In this case, dominant discourses not only influence how an artist like Spalding presents herself but also how we as an audience listen to her music and perceive her as an artist. Therefore, an open discussion about the meaning of frequently used concepts and why we use them in the first place furthers our understanding of them and is essential to the relevance of research in the humanities.

In the first chapter I will explore how dominant ideas about chamber music and jazz develop over time, and how we as an audience enforce them. I will start by discussing the idea of chamber music specifically, trying to create a context to further our understanding as to why this idea came into existence, and what elements it consists of. In the second part of the first chapter I will compare dominant discourses of chamber music (and classical music in general) and jazz to determine where they match or differ, touching on the subjects of ethnicity, gender and genius. I will argue that these issues play a large role in both discourses, and that they are particularly important to the identity of artists like Spalding, as they determine how artists are seen and present themselves.

In the second chapter, I will analyse different sources such as interviews with Spalding, articles about her music and musicianship and reviews of her album and live performances to test the theories laid out in the first chapter. In what ways do Spalding and her critics either confirm or

oppose general ideas? In the first part of the chapter, I will look at their treatment of chamber music specifically. In the second part, I focus on the way issues of ethnicity, gender and genius are being addressed.

Finally, in the third chapter I will analyse the album itself, focussing on the elements that together comprise our idea of chamber music. I will give an overview of the tracks and talk about the instrumentation and the significance of several of Spalding's creative decisions. Additionally, I will conduct an in-depth musical analysis of one of the songs, concentrating on the relationship and the division of different roles between the instruments featured. In what ways does *Chamber Music Society* allude to or incorporate the dominant idea of chamber music?

Consequently, in these three chapters, I will use Spalding's *Chamber Music Society* as a case study to take a look at the way dominant ideas, in this case on chamber music and jazz, function in practice. I will try to give a clear and comprehensive answer to the following question: in what ways does Esperanza Spalding's *Chamber Music Society* confirm or challenge dominant discourses of chamber music and jazz? By answering this question, I hope to illustrate how dominant discourses play a role in the creation of Spalding's artistic identity and creative output.

Chamber music and jazz: ideas and definitions

1.1 Defining 'chamber music'

Before we can take a closer look at *Chamber Music Society* itself, it is important to define 'chamber music' in this specific context. As mentioned before, we can assume that there exists a predominant idea of chamber music in the general consciousness. By this, I mean that almost everyone has a certain concept in mind when talking about chamber music, whether they are actually knowledgeable in it or not. However, it is impossible to give a clear definition: the history of the term is long and diverse, and its meaning has changed drastically since it was first coined. Chamber music from the sixteenth century, for example, as it was classified then for the first time, was vocal music performed in private chambers as opposed to vocal music performed in the church. This definition has little connection to nineteenth-century chamber music that was defined mainly by its scoring and not by its location.¹ Nonetheless, the term is used widely and frequently and it is assumed that most people understand what is meant by it. This presumption relies on the 'idea' of chamber music mentioned before, an idea that came into existence through another important development: the process of canonization.

Lydia Goehr describes this process of canonization in music and the regulation of the work-concept in her book *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*. She argues that, because almost all composers before the 1800s were in the service of either the court or the church, their musical output was not necessarily considered 'theirs': it was the property of those who commissioned the music. This music was often composed for specific events and not expected to outlast the event for which it was created. Around 1800, however, multiple factors contributed to a change in the way music was received and perceived by its audience and critics. This change also altered the position of the composer. Reinforced by romantic thinkers such as E.T.A. Hoffmann, the idea that music (and instrumental music specifically) could transcend and exist outside of the ordinary and mundane meant that the production of music took a different shape: composers became more and more independent from their former employers, and their job was no longer to write per request, but to write from personal inspiration.²

James Parakilas describes how these works were then preserved and enforced by institutions that gained more and more ground in the nineteenth century such as conservatories,

¹ John H. Baron, *Intimate Music: A History of the Idea of Chamber Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 1-3.

² Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

and how public concert halls were designed and constructed in such a way as to perform this music in the most ideal circumstances. Parakilas notes that it was in the nineteenth century that “the word *classic*, which had long been in literary and artistic use, was first applied to music.”³ The way history has been constructed, framed and idealized in the nineteenth century has a continuous influence on the way ‘classical’⁴ music is defined and interpreted by its modern-day listener. Parakilas defines classical music as a distinct category from early and contemporary music. While classical music is intrinsically linked with its background history (the feature that sets it apart from contemporary music that has no history yet), it is different from early music practice because it does not need to be reconstructed: it thrives on a general idea of sound and shape that people qualify as ‘classical’ (an idea that is shaped mainly by the music of Beethoven and the romantic composers that came afterwards).⁵

This definition of classical music is closely linked to our idea of chamber music, as this is seen as a subgenre of classical music as a whole. In one interview, Spalding defined chamber music as “music among friends”,⁶ alluding to her own experiences of playing chamber music as a violinist, the instrument she played before picking up the double bass. By using terms like ‘acoustic’, ‘intimate’ and ‘serious’, a certain image of chamber music arises. The terms themselves correlate closely with the elements that make up the idea of chamber music as described in detail in John H. Baron’s *Intimate Music: A History of the Idea of Chamber Music*, namely that chamber music must be: 1) instrumental music, 2) ensemble music (for two or more players), 3) solistic music (each player has its own distinct, individual part), 4) serious music and 5) intimate music. I will discuss these elements in detail and compare them to Spalding’s statements in the next chapter.

1.2 Talking about chamber music and jazz: dominant discourses

With *Chamber Music Society*, Spalding positions herself within two different discourses that have both differences and similarities: that of chamber music (closely linked to classical music discourse as stated above) and that of jazz. While discourses develop and change over time, the term ‘dominant’ discourse refers to those theories, concepts and terminology that are the most influential at a given

³ James Parakilas, “Classical Music as Popular Music,” *The Journal of Musicology* 3, no. 1 (1984): 3.

⁴ ‘Classical’ in this context refers to the repertoire encompassing the music of both the classical and the romantic period.

⁵ Although the music of Haydn and Mozart is included in the definition of ‘classical’ repertoire, the way their music is performed has changed drastically over the last decades. A more historically informed way of performing has meant that their music is nowadays performed on historical instruments and with more period-appropriate directions from the conductor. Therefore, a case could be made for classifying it as ‘early’ music.

⁶ Esperanza Spalding, “Esperanza Spalding: It Takes a ‘Society,’” interview by Michelle Norris, *All Things Considered*, NPR, August 20, 2010, audio, 2:03, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129323549>.

moment. The way we talk about and interact with chamber music and jazz is influenced by these dominant discourses, and it is interesting to examine Spalding's position in relation to them by releasing and promoting *Chamber Music Society*.

There are a couple of similarities between the two discourses that are quite striking, mainly in the way the histories of chamber music and jazz are written down. In the next section, I want to focus on three issues that feature prominently in both dominant discourses that I believe to be particularly interesting because of Spalding's position and background: the issues of ethnicity, gender and creative genius.

In *Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography*, Scott DeVaux traces the way jazz history has been written down since it first began to gain recognition as a 'serious' artform. The first jazz critics and historians started a process of mythologizing the origins and the founding fathers of jazz. Furthermore, in search for validation of the musical material itself (and to get rid of the notion of jazz music as 'mere' entertainment music), it was posed by some as America's own 'classical music', and presented as a kind of African-American answer to European art music. These processes came with a couple of consequences. Firstly, it meant that the history of jazz was often presented in a straight-forward manner, simplifying the story to fit in a certain frame and timeline: a story of victory over struggle and of continuous progress. Secondly, by trying to define and label certain music as jazz, a discussion started in the 1960s and never really stopped about what jazz actually is, and how far its boundaries can be stretched. After the conception of bebop in the 1940s, jazz musicians went in different directions and there was no longer a straight line to follow. This led to a lot of confusion about the direction 'real' jazz should take and created a crisis of identity: what makes jazz jazz? As DeVaux states, ethnicity played a role in the recognition of the genre as such and thus made jazz "an oppositional discourse: the music of an oppressed minority culture, tainted by its association with commercial entertainment in a society that reserves its greatest respect for art that is carefully removed from daily life."⁷

Jazz' difficult relationship with Western classical music actually forms an interesting thread in the historiography of jazz in general. Links are constantly made and broken; its connection then exaggerated, then denied. The complicated history of Third Stream, a subgenre of jazz music that tried to forge new bonds with classical music, is the perfect example. Its main advocates were pursuing an "idea of combining elements of notated European art music with jazz style and improvisation" out of a conviction that by then (the 1950s), "'classical' music and jazz [could be seen] as kindred musics within the realm of high art."⁸ However, it struck a wrong chord: not so

⁷ Scott DeVaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography," *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 3 (1991): 530.

⁸ David Joyner, "Analyzing Third Stream," *Contemporary Music Review* 19, no. 1 (2000): 73.

much by classical musicians, but mainly by jazz lovers and critics who felt that Third Stream musicians and composers (despite their insistence of the opposite) were trying to improve jazz by adding classical elements, therefore implying jazz (a mainly African-American artform) to be inferior to Western classical music.

This highlights how strongly classical music and chamber music are associated with European culture. Although conservatories and orchestras are no longer solely accessible to white people and the repertoire is performed and listened to by people from many different cultures, the music itself is still very much rooted in its European legacy. The issues of ethnicity and race and the strained relationship between classical music and jazz are interesting in the case of *Chamber Music Society*, because of Spalding's own mixed-race background. Another interesting issue is that of gender, as Spalding, as a female bassist and composer, holds an interesting position within both genres.

Within the field of jazz music, Spalding is a remarkable sight. This does not mean that there are no women performing jazz on a professional level at all, but rather that the jazz canon is one dominated by men. While the sight of a female vocalist is not a very rare one, female instrumentalists tend to be seen as exceptions on stage. In her article *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, Sherrie Tucker explains that “[i]n dominant jazz discourse . . . , jazz heroes achieve greatness through male musical bonding in homosocial bands.”⁹ In this narrative, women often fulfil the role of an obstacle in the way of their partner's path to success. In everyday practice, Erin L. Wehr has ascertained that less women continue studying jazz after high school, and that more women experience anxiety and stress when having to improvise and perform in jazz ensembles (compared to male musicians). Based on empirical research, she describes how tokenism (being the only woman in a group and consequently being cast in stereotype roles) can lead to stereotype threat (being afraid to confirm the stereotype) and an avoidance of participation of women in jazz altogether.¹⁰

When we look at chamber music, we can assume that the performance of chamber music is not so much gendered these days: there seems to be an even number of men and women studying and performing chamber music, and music education is easily accessible for female students. However, if we can assume that the canon of chamber music is dominated by musical works of the late 18th- and 19th century, this would imply that the names we associate with chamber music *compositions* are almost exclusively male. Consequently, the role of the composer, that of a *creating*

⁹ Sherrie Tucker, “Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies,” *Current Musicology* 71-73 (2001-2002): 378.

¹⁰ Erin L. Wehr, “Women in Jazz.” *International Journal of Music Education* 34, no. 4 (2016): 472-476.

force, is still seen as predominantly male because we enforce a canon and an idea of genius that is shaped by male composers like Mozart and Beethoven.

This brings us to the issue of genius. Hand in hand with the process of canonization of musical works and the emancipation of the composer as independent artist, came the idea that to surpass the level of craftsmanship (seeing how musicians were primarily seen as craftsmen until the late 18th-century), composers had to possess the quality of geniality. This was not something that could be achieved solely through study and experience; it was an intuitive power that was seen as either God-given or possessed naturally. In *The Possessor and the Possessed*, Peter Kivy distinguishes two different kinds of genius: the Platonic (“the possessed”) and the Longinian genius (“the possessor”). Whereas the Platonic explanation of genius is that the person gifted with this quality is not in control of its genius, but rather a vessel through which divine or higher powers speak (exemplified by the image of the child prodigy of which Mozart is the most famous one), the Longinian variant of genius is that of the Creator, a genius like God himself who has the power to stand above the rules or even create them (with Beethoven as its most recognizable example). Kivy argues that these two kinds of genius alternate with each other as being the most prevailing at a given time in history.¹¹ In the next chapter, I want to take a look at the way these two kinds of genius and the other theories discussed so far feature in the publicity around Spalding’s musicianship.

¹¹ Peter Kivy, *The Possessor and the Possessed: Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, and the Idea of Musical Genius* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2001).

Testing the theories: the promotion and reception of *Chamber Music Society*

To test the theories described in the first chapter, I will now discuss several sources on Spalding's album and musicianship to see if parallels can be drawn between the idea of chamber music as described by Baron and the idea of chamber music of Spalding and her critics. I have analysed several types of sources: 1) interviews with Spalding, therefore, Spalding in her own words, 2) articles *about* Spalding and her album, 3) reviews of the album *Chamber Music Society* (and some reviews about her previous and follow-up albums as comparison) and 4) reviews of live-performances. Later on, I will also go into more detail about ideas of ethnicity, gender and genius.

2.1 "This is something serious!": Spalding and critics on Chamber Music Society

In the first chapter, I listed the five elements of the idea of chamber music as coined by Baron. Of these five elements, two stand out as being the most often alluded to in written material around *Chamber Music Society*. First of all, in multiple sources Spalding and her critics refer to the 'seriousness' of chamber music. This serious air surrounds the album: in an interview with *The Telegraph*, Spalding describes the way she uses the outfits she wears on stage and when promoting her album as a way to emphasize the message she wants to get across. Because her music "is currently 'quieter and more intimate, [she] wear[s] something very reserved, sort of this librarian, intellectual look, because [she wants people to know that] this is something serious!"¹² This same serious aura is perpetrated in her live performances from the very moment she enters the stage. One review describes how Spalding "came on stage, sat in an armchair and poured herself a glass of red wine,"¹³ while another notes that "[t]here are no thanks to applause between numbers, just a dignified silence from the performers as between movements in a classical concert."¹⁴

The second element that is referred to constantly is the intimacy of both the album and her performances. Spalding's own interpretation of chamber music as "music among friends", music made in the privacy of one's own home for a select audience, is addressed in multiple articles. Spalding describes *Chamber Music Society* as "intimate" and "introverted", the opposite of her follow-

¹² Esperanza Spalding, "Esperanza Spalding: Interview," interview by Michael Gonzales, *The Telegraph*, March 27, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/worldfolkandjazz/8402191/Esperanza-Spalding-interview.html>.

¹³ "Esperanza Spalding, Barbican, review," *The Telegraph*, last modified April 11, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/live-music-reviews/8442487/Esperanza-Spalding-Barbican-review.html>.

¹⁴ "London Jazz Festival Review: Esperanza Spalding," *London Jazz News*, last modified November 14, 2010, <http://www.londonjazznews.com/2010/11/london-jazz-festival-review-2-esperanza.html>.

up album *Radio Music Society* (rooted in pop and funk) which she defines as “bombastic” and “extraverted”, saying that “*Chamber Music Society* draws its force from its intimacy.”¹⁵

Of the other three elements, the idea that chamber music must be instrumental is referred to once: in one review of the album, the author points to the fact that on several tunes the vocals are wordless. According to the author, this way the vocals take a more equal position to the strings in the whole than when lyrics would have been added (implying that lyrics would draw attention away from the melodies in the strings).¹⁶ The idea that chamber music must be ensemble music, in which neither player takes the backseat to the other, is also reflected on in this remark and alluded to several other times: one reviewer remarks that Spalding’s “easy virtuosity contributes to a musical whole rather than grabbing the attention”¹⁷ (alluding to both her bass-playing and her singing), while another says of the arrangements that Spalding “allows her hybrid group to retain its own identity throughout.”¹⁸

Whereas the factor of intimacy is quite easily achieved by using a small-scaled ensemble and acoustic instruments, I believe that the element of ‘serious music’ exists not only in the performance of the term (the music is given the gleam of seriousness by the way it is presented and treated by performers and audiences alike), but features on the album and in the music itself as well, alongside the other elements Baron listed (instrumental, ensemble and solistic music). I will discuss this in more detail in the next chapter, where I will be giving a musical analysis of the album in general and where I will go into the structure of one song specifically.

2.2 On ethnicity, gender and genius

The question of ethnicity is interesting in Spalding’s case. Her mixed-race background (European, African-American, Native-American and Hispanic) puts her in a special position, especially when exploring cross-over territory. In an interview with Al Jazeera, Spalding says that “growing up, I didn’t identify with any of those [cultures] specifically” which made her more or less “cultural identity neutral”. She later on explains that her search for identity is prominent in her music, and ascribes her love for many different musical styles to that search. During the promotion of *Chamber Music Society*, Spalding does not really address the question of ethnicity and the role it plays in

¹⁵ Esperanza Spalding, “Esperanza Spalding’s Musical Family,” interview by Michael Gallant, *DownBeat* 79, no. 5 (May 2012): 26,

<http://www.downbeat.com/digitaledition/2012/DB201205/>.

¹⁶ “Esperanza Spalding: Chamber Music Society,” PopMatters, last modified August 16, 2010, <https://www.popmatters.com/129087-esperanza-spalding-chamber-music-society-2496159684.html>.

¹⁷ “A Review of Esperanza Spalding’s ‘Chamber Music Society,’” No Treble, last modified August 17, 2010, <http://www.notreble.com/buzz/2010/08/17/a-review-esperanza-spaldings-chamber-music-society/>.

¹⁸ PopMatters, “Esperanza Spalding.”

chamber music and jazz discourse. One could of course argue that these days, ethnicity is not necessarily a defining factor in jazz music, seeing how widely the music has been embraced by musicians with different ethnicities and how closely these musicians work together with black jazz artists. Spalding herself has worked with musicians from various cultural backgrounds, and this album is no exception. However, in the promotion of her next album, *Radio Music Society*, which takes influences from more outspoken Afro-American genres such as funk and soul, ethnicity *does* take a more important place. Several songs have a political undertone and directly address the search for identity and pride in African-Americans. Here, Spalding's African-American background takes the front stage, while on *Chamber Music Society* it is her 'cultural identity neutrality' that is emphasized. Of course, this should not be interpreted as an intentional move per se: different issues can come to the foreground more strongly at different moments, so perhaps the issue of ethnicity played a more prominent role in Spalding's thoughts during the writing process of *Radio Music Society* than it did during *Chamber Music Society*. Nonetheless, it is interesting to notice this difference as it ever so briefly shines a light on the complicated relationship between different styles of music and cultural heritage.

Spalding's gender takes a more central role in articles and reviews alike. As an excellent bassist, Spalding is often lauded as an exceptionality in her field. Although most articles stay far away from sexist or denigrating commentary (although one reviewer cannot help but note that Spalding possesses "unusual talent for a female musician" and compares the way she plays her instrument "with the tender touch of a mother running fingers through her children's hair"¹⁹), Spalding's gender is always something which has to be addressed as an anomaly. Multiple articles mention her small stature (all the more striking next to her double bass) and her good looks, before reassuring the reader that it is not her looks but her talent that has earned her her celebrity. However, I believe that with *Chamber Music Society*, Spalding manages (at least partly) to move most of the attention away from her gender to her musicianship. While her exceptional status within her field continues to be mentioned, I think that compared to earlier articles and reviews a difference in choice of words is noticeable. Spalding, already hailed as an excellent bassist, vocalist and *songwriter*, now benefits from one other association with chamber music: she achieves the epitaph of *composer*.

This leads us to the final question: that of genius. As explained in the first chapter, two types of genius exist next to each other: the Platonic genius (characterized as the eternal child) and the Longinian genius (characterized as the creator). While no article outright describes Spalding as

¹⁹ "Esperanza Spalding @ Barbican, London," MusicOMH, last modified April 8, 2011, <https://www.musicomh.com/reviews/live/esperanza-spalding-barbican-london>.

childlike (although her physical smallness and her youthful demeanour are addressed quite frequently), there is an interesting difference in focus when describing the source of Spalding's genius between Spalding's critics and Spalding herself. Most articles about *Chamber Music Society* start with a description of Spalding's first encounter with chamber music. The image of the child prodigy is clearly visible in this introduction of Spalding on the website of Concord Music, her record company:

Spalding pursued study of her first instrument, the violin, at a time when most children her age were just learning to read. At age five, she was playing with the Chamber Music Society of Oregon in her hometown of Portland. By the time she exited the group at 15 as a concertmaster, she was composing and playing acoustic bass professionally with local bands.²⁰

Spalding, on the other hand, prefers to accentuate hard work and long hours of practice as the key to good musicianship, as exemplified in multiple interviews. "It's the process of doing something over and over until you finally get it right!", she explains in an interview with *Downbeat*. Later on in the same interview, she addresses the question of natural talent even more clearly, saying that "you're seeking something that only grows by *diligent cultivation*. You can't buy it or *inherit* it."²¹ [emphasis added]

Whereas some like to present Spalding as the Platonic genius, possessed from an early age by this spirit of genius, Spalding portrays herself as fully in charge of both her creative output and her musicianship. However, to say that she presents herself as the Longinian genius would be untrue as well: instead, she chooses very deliberately for an association with craftsmanship. By drawing attention to her work ethos, she presents herself as a serious musician, and demands to be treated as such. Furthermore, by associating herself with chamber music and its 'serious' image, and by acknowledging her history in playing and performing this music, she enhances this image both as a musician and a composer.

²⁰ "Esperanza Spalding," Concord Music Group, accessed December 19, 2017, <http://www.concordmusicgroup.com/artists/Esperanza-Spalding/>.

²¹ Esperanza Spalding, "Esperanza Spalding: Grace in the Spotlight," interview by Fred Bouchard, *DownBeat* 79, no. 12 (December 2012): 39, <http://www.downbeat.com/digitaledition/2012/DB201212/>.

A musical analysis of *Chamber Music Society*

In chapter two, I argued that four of Baron's five listed elements of chamber music can be found in the music itself. To test this hypothesis, I will take a closer look at the album and give an overview of some of its important features, touching on theory discussed earlier on. Then I will analyse one of the tracks of *Chamber Music Society* with the elements of Baron in mind.

3.1 Chamber Music Society: a general overview

First of all, the track list of *Chamber Music Society* consists of eleven tracks. Out of these eleven tracks, five ('Little Fly', 'Wild is the Wind', 'Apple Blossom', 'Winter Sun' and 'Inútil Paisagem') have lyrics, and six ('Knowledge of Good and Evil', 'Really Very Small', 'Chacarera', 'As a Sprout', 'What a Friend' and 'Short and Sweet') are wordless and closest to what could be considered 'instrumental'. By this I mean that the vocals are deployed in such a way that they take on the role of instrument, sometimes doubling or harmonizing with the strings or piano. The amount of these kind of songs is noticeable, especially when you compare this to the album that came after *Chamber Music Society*: on *Radio Music Society*, all twelve tracks have lyrics. This would mean that *Chamber Music Society*, at least partly, meets Baron's requirement that chamber music in general is instrumental. The complete set-up of *Chamber Music Society* consists of vocals, double bass,²² piano, drums (and on some tracks percussion), guitar (on one track only: 'Apple Blossom') and three strings: violin, viola and cello. The strings are featured on almost every track safe for one ('Inútil Paisagem'), although not all strings play on all the tracks at the same time.

Taking a closer look at the songs that do have lyrics, it is interesting to notice that 'Little Fly' is a poem of William Blake (published in 1794) set to music by Spalding. This is the first (and so far, only) time that Spalding set a poem to music instead of writing her own lyrics. The choice for the poem of William Blake, intentional or not, immediately gives the listener an association with the time in which it was written, as the use of words as 'thy' and 'thou' implies, and transports us to the time in which our ideas about classical music and creativity took shape. Although this might be an unintentional link, I think it is striking that Spalding not only refers back to a tradition that came into existence in the early nineteenth century, but also chooses a text from around the same time period as the basis of one of her songs.

²² Because of the way the double bass is played on this album (always plucked), I treat the instrument as a part of the jazz section instead of the string section.

‘Wild is the Wind’ and ‘Inútil Paisagem’ are respectively a jazz and bossa nova standard (not written or composed by Spalding) and both are thus firmly rooted in a specific tradition: two styles in which Spalding is clearly at home. Although neither can be qualified as ‘classical’, I think the choice for established standards does underscore the concept of working in or continuing a tradition and might strengthen Spalding’s claims to working in the tradition of chamber music as much as the traditions of jazz and bossa nova. Only ‘Apple Blossom’ and ‘Winter Sun’ have original lyrics written by Spalding. A common theme in the songs (both originals and covers) is the allegoric use of nature and natural imagery, most importantly to illustrate the passing of time. This seems to refer back to romantic ideals of beauty as much as the dominant idea of chamber music on this album seems to be rooted in romantic body of thought. All song lyrics would satisfy the qualification of ‘serious’ music, dealing with themes like lost love (‘Wild is the Wind’, ‘Inútil Paisagem’, ‘Apple Blossom’), death (‘Little Fly’, ‘Apple Blossom’) and the victory of love over struggle and/or depression (‘Winter Sun’).

The titles of the wordless songs do not so much continue this natural theme, but are more abstract and less visual. ‘Chacarera’ is the name of a popular dance and type of folk music from Argentina, thus stating only that this composition (written by Spalding’s pianist Leo Genovese) can be classified as (or was inspired by) a chacarera but giving no other specifications. The rest of the titles do not give more than a vague impression of the existence of a theme or an underlying thought that is not clear to the listener. Nor does Spalding explain any of the other titles in one of her interviews. Of the six wordless songs, ‘As a Sprout’ stands out as a very short piece composed solely for the strings. This is the only track on which Spalding does not play or sing.

3.2 Analysing ‘Knowledge of Good and Evil’

For a more in-depth musical analysis, I have chosen to take a closer look at the second track of the album: ‘Knowledge of Good and Evil’. My starting point was the sheet music of this song published by Hal Leonard. I used this version, a *very* condensed score for vocals and piano, as a guide for my own transcription of the vocals, strings (violin, viola and cello) and double bass parts.²³ I am aware that the piano and drums provide more harmonic and rhythmic information, but taking into account the time I had to make the transcription, I decided to focus on the vocals and strings and the relationship between these instruments. I will, however, also briefly address the role of the piano and drums later on in my analysis. I cannot claim my transcription is entirely flawless, but

²³ I am incredibly indebted to Martijn Hak, who helped me particularly with the transcription of the string parts. Without his help I would never have been able to deliver such a detailed score.

nonetheless, I think there is enough information in the sheet music to give an accurate impression of this piece and to enable me to make a substantial analysis.

‘Knowledge of Good and Evil’ consists of several composed parts and several solos. For this analysis, I want to focus on the first 22 bars, before the beginning of the first vocal solo. Throughout the piece, material introduced in these bars will show up again and again. These 22 bars can be divided in five groups of four, with the last two bars functioning as a bridge from the main theme to the solo.

Figure 1 Bar 1 with pick-up

Figure 2 Bars 2-4

The piece begins with a chromatic pick-up played by the double bass leading into a phrase of four bars that is repeated (with minor variations) five times. This phrase is mainly built around the notes B2 and E3, with a chromatic line in bar two leading down from E3 to A#2 at the beginning of bar three, before jumping back to E3 and ending on B2 again in bar four. Meanwhile, the violin and viola are introduced in bar one playing pizzicato accents (sometimes separately from the bassline, sometimes playing along with it), before switching to bowing in the fourth bar (where the cello also joins in) where they build up a chord resembling a B half-diminished chord with an

E added. In the first bar, the second voice joins as well, providing mostly harmonic information by singing a pattern of A-E-A, then G#-D-G# in bar two and then joining the bass and the strings in a chromatic line, albeit moving upwards with the violin instead of moving down with the double bass. In the third bar, a pattern of G-D-G is sung on top of the A# in the viola and double bass and the F# in the violin, before the voice finally breaks out of this three-note shape in bar four in a descending line from E to B.

Figure 3 Bars 5-8

The musical score for Figure 3, Bars 5-8, consists of six staves: V. 1, V. 2, VI., Vla., Vc., and D. Bs. The notation includes various rhythmic values such as eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. There are several triplets and slurs indicated. The key signature has one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 7/8. The score shows intricate harmonic and melodic relationships between the instruments.

In bar five, the first theme is introduced, sung by the second voice and doubled in the violin (although they part ways after the fifth bar where the violin stays on A#4 while the voice jumps from A#3 to F#4). The viola and cello mimic the rhythmical motion of the theme, with the cello playing a countermelody in contrary motion. Again, in the eighth bar we hear a chord built upon the B in the bass, this time with a perfect fifth in the cello creating something resembling a B minor chord with a minor seventh (the A4 in the violin). However, like the half-diminished chord in bar four, this chord seems to be disrupted by an A# (the major seventh) played in the cello against the minor seventh in the violin.

The musical score for Figure 4, Bars 9 and 10, consists of six staves: V. 1, V. 2, VI., Vla., Vc., and D. Bs. The notation continues with complex rhythmic patterns and chromatic lines. The key signature remains one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 7/8. The score shows intricate harmonic and melodic relationships between the instruments.

Figure 4 Bars 9 and 10

Figure 5 Bars 11 and 12

The musical score for Figure 5 consists of six staves: V. 1 (Violin 1), V. 2 (Violin 2), Vl. (Viola), Vla. (Violoncello), Vc. (Violoncello), and D. Bs. (Double Bass). The score covers two bars, 11 and 12. In bar 11, V. 1 plays a melodic line starting on G4, moving chromatically down to B3. V. 2 has a short melodic fill. Vl. and Vla. play sustained notes. Vc. has a whole rest. D. Bs. plays a rhythmic pattern. In bar 12, V. 1 continues the melodic line. V. 2 has another short melodic fill. Vl. and Vla. play sustained notes. Vc. has a whole rest. D. Bs. continues the rhythmic pattern.

The second theme is introduced by the first voice (Spalding herself), continuing the chromaticism introduced earlier and more or less playing with the same tonal material as the first theme, which seems to be centred around B. Here, the strings and the second voice take a less pronounced role. The strings play long, sustained notes in the ninth bar and, together with the second voice, short melodic fills at the beginning of bar ten, eleven and twelve. It is interesting to notice how the second voice blends in with the strings, almost taking on the role of an additional string player.

Figure 6 bars 13 and 14

The musical score for Figure 6 consists of six staves: V. 1 (Violin 1), V. 2 (Violin 2), Vl. (Viola), Vla. (Violoncello), Vc. (Violoncello), and D. Bs. (Double Bass). The score covers two bars, 13 and 14. In bar 13, V. 1 has a whole rest. V. 2 has a whole rest. Vl. plays a rhythmic pattern. Vla. plays a melodic line. Vc. has a whole rest. D. Bs. plays a rhythmic pattern. In bar 14, V. 1 has a whole rest. V. 2 has a whole rest. Vl. plays a rhythmic pattern. Vla. plays a melodic line. Vc. has a whole rest. D. Bs. plays a rhythmic pattern.

Figure 7 Bars 15 and 16

Figure 7 shows musical notation for bars 15 and 16. The score includes staves for V. 1, V. 2, VI., Vla., Vc., and D. Bs. Bar 15 shows V. 1 with a whole rest, V. 2 with a melodic line, VI. with a repeated eighth-note pattern, Vla. with a melodic line, Vc. with a repeated eighth-note pattern, and D. Bs. with a melodic line. Bar 16 shows V. 1 with a whole rest, V. 2 with a melodic line, VI. with a repeated eighth-note pattern, Vla. with a melodic line, Vc. with a repeated eighth-note pattern, and D. Bs. with a melodic line.

Bar thirteen is a repetition of the first theme, this time played by the viola with a few embellishments or variations. In this section of four bars, the first voice is again absent, with the second voice returning in bar fifteen with the triads from the beginning (again providing harmonic information rather than embellishments). The violin and cello play a repeated pattern of three sixteenth notes, which increase in frequency and colour.

Figure 8 Bars 17 and 18

Figure 8 shows musical notation for bars 17 and 18. The score includes staves for V. 1, V. 2, VI., Vla., Vc., and D. Bs. Bar 17 shows V. 1 with a melodic line, V. 2 with a melodic line, VI. with a whole rest, Vla. with a whole rest, Vc. with a whole rest, and D. Bs. with a melodic line. Bar 18 shows V. 1 with a melodic line, V. 2 with a melodic line, VI. with a repeated eighth-note pattern, Vla. with a melodic line, Vc. with a whole rest, and D. Bs. with a melodic line.

Figure 9 Bars 19 and 20

Figure 10 Bars 21 and 22

Finally, bar seventeen sees the return of the second theme, again sung by the first voice with an additional harmony provided by the second voice (first in sixths *on top* the original melody, then when the first voice soars upwards doubling this pattern in thirds *under* the original melody). The strings bring back the pattern of three sixteenth notes from bar thirteen, before joining the voices on a sustained chord of B-F-A-D-E: the same chord that closed off the first section in bar four. However, there are two additional bars, that seem to function as some sort of suspension before the song bursts into the more high energy vocal solo. In bar 21, a melodic line in the second voice is mimicked by the strings, before jumping into a final harmony of B-G#-F-C#.

What we can conclude from this is that the first four bars serve as an intro to the piece in its entirety, and make us acquainted to the basic harmonic and rhythmic material the piece is based upon. The second voice, together with the strings, provides most of the harmonic information while the double bass introduces us to the syncopated rhythm prevalent throughout these 22 bars. This rhythm is supported by the strings and voice and in all parts chromaticism features heavily,

making it difficult to establish a clear key centre although the melodies mostly seem to circle around B.²⁴ After this short intro, a first and a second theme are introduced and immediately after this both themes are played again, with slight variations in timbre, accompaniment and ornamentation.

Overall, the vocals and strings seem to be taking on alternating roles: sometimes one of the voices sings the main theme, then one of the strings doubles or takes over, all instruments constantly switching between lead and accompaniment. There is a lot of interplay between the different instruments and often their parts are heavily intertwined, making it almost impossible to take them apart. I noticed this especially while transcribing the piece: because the harmonies in the strings combined with the voices are so rich, it is often difficult to hear which instrument is playing which notes. Together, the vocals and strings provide a lot of harmonic and rhythmic information. Although piano and drums also feature on this track, in most parts they are not necessary to get a concrete idea of the piece. The role of the piano is mainly to double or enforce the double bass, to fill up the lower register and to play some melodic fills in between sentences. The drums mostly punctuate the rhythm already played by the double bass, strings and voices, while also rhythmically linking the different sections together and creating a dynamic build-up.

With regards to Baron's notion that chamber music must be *solistic* and *ensemble music*, I am of the opinion that in the case of 'Knowledge of Good and Evil', Spalding's song and the overall arrangement of it meets both requirements. Although it is important to note that a standard jazz combo in its most basic form would meet the requirement of being solistic and ensemble music solely because every instrument has its own distinct part (and a combo is per definition an ensemble), what I have tried to investigate here is how each part relates to the others, and especially how the strings function in the whole. In a more traditional jazz-strings combination, the jazz trio or quartet often functions in much the same way it would without the strings.²⁵ In this case, the strings add a certain kind of sound and timbre to the group but function more or less separate from the other instruments. However, in the case of 'Knowledge of Good and Evil', the solistic element features more in the traditional 'classical' instruments (the strings) than the 'jazz' instruments (in this case, the piano and drums). The strings in this piece are not merely decorative, but an integral part of the whole. Without them, the song will not hold up. Although the piano and drums still have their own distinct part, they are less essential to the composition than the strings and voices, to the extent that leaving them out would still leave the song recognizable and playable.

²⁴ In the Hal Leonard edition of this piece, no key signature was given. I decided to follow their example while making my own transcription.

²⁵ For example, *Bird with Strings* (1950) and *Cbet Baker with Strings* (1954).

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I approached my main research question from different angles to find a comprehensive answer on how Esperanza Spalding's *Chamber Music Society* confirms or challenges dominant discourses of chamber music and jazz. In the first chapter, I tried to establish which theories were relevant for my research, and what they can tell us about the way dominant discourses come into existence and develop and change over time. In doing so, I concluded that the process of canonization in the nineteenth century not only influenced the way we define chamber music, but also influenced our perception on composers and musicians working within its idiom. These perceptions are tied closely to concepts such as ethnicity, gender and genius. Canonization and the almost mythological status some composers (and musicians in general) have been relegated to, also influenced our perception of the history of jazz music and jazz musicians.

The idea of chamber music, as it was defined by Baron, also hinges upon nineteenth-century thought. In the second chapter, I concluded after my research of a selection of interviews, reviews and articles about Spalding and *Chamber Music Society* that Spalding's idea of chamber music correlates quite closely with the idea of chamber music as it was formulated by Baron. She emphasizes the serious and intimate character of the music, both in her presentation of the album and in her performance of the music. This idea is not or rarely challenged by critics and interviewers. However, things start to diverge more when issues of ethnicity, gender and genius are being discussed. The image that Spalding creates and enforces often does not correlate with dominant discourse or with the views of critics on her music and musicianship. While both her ethnicity and gender are addressed in almost every review I have encountered, these are not issues she focusses on in her promotion of *Chamber Music Society*. As I have argued, her ethnicity is addressed in interviews, but she places more focus on a certain 'cultural identity neutrality'. Because of her mixed background, she can easily make the switch between musical concepts such as chamber music, that is traditionally associated with its European legacy, and jazz, that is traditionally associated with its African-American roots. While her gender is apparently exceptional enough to deserve a special notion by almost all reviewers, she does not address her gender as something exceptional within her work field (although she will address gender roles in interviews about later albums). Her view on genius also diverts from that of interviewers and critics: while some try to fit her into the role of a Platonic genius, she herself emphasizes craftsmanship and hard work as the key to her musicianship.

In the third chapter, I argue that musically, *Chamber Music Society* as a whole correlates quite closely to the idea of chamber music and includes many of the elements Baron lists. The amount

of songs with wordless vocals is especially noticeable, and the themes explored on the album fit well with the element of ‘serious’ music. In my analysis of ‘Knowledge of Good and Evil’, I pointed out the roles of both the vocals and the strings and the almost symbiotic relationship between these sections, suggesting that here the strings do not have a merely decorative function in the whole arrangement. As such, *Chamber Music Society* goes beyond a simple association with classical chamber music based on instrumentation, but also employs each instrument in a way that correlates with Baron’s assessment that chamber music is both solistic and ensemble music: each instrument has its own distinct role in the whole, while at the same time each and every part is essential to the overall musical product.

With *Chamber Music Society*, Spalding took on an ambitious project that from the outset tried to achieve something nearly impossible. By trying to bring together chamber music and jazz, a discussion about what these concepts actually mean was unavoidable. Although this discussion has not been played out in academic spheres, hints of it can be found in the reception of *Chamber Music Society*. Although most reviews were favourable, some reviewers accused Spalding of elitism, said that the album lacked accessibility, and that the image of classical chamber music that Spalding enforced was old-fashioned and predictable.

Nevertheless, what Spalding achieved with this album is twofold. While I believe that Spalding’s idea of chamber music is very much founded on a concept that was given its recognizable shape in the nineteenth century and thus does not challenge the dominant idea of chamber music as defined by Baron, I think that at the same time this project helped her to establish a more defined and three-dimensional idea of who she is as a musician and composer. By deliberately choosing for an association with and writing her own material within two very strong traditions, she creates a space for herself that outstretches the boundaries of one specific genre.

References

Primary sources:

Bouchard, Fred. "Esperanza Spalding: Grace in the Spotlight." *DownBeat* 79, no. 12 (2012): 36-39. <http://www.downbeat.com/digitaledition/2012/DB201212/> (Accessed December 27, 2017).

Concord Music Group. "Esperanza Spalding." Accessed December 19, 2017. <http://www.concordmusicgroup.com/artists/Esperanza-Spalding/>.

Gallant, Michael. "Esperanza Spalding's Musical Family." *DownBeat* 79, no. 5 (2012): 24-28. <http://www.downbeat.com/digitaledition/2012/DB201205/> (Accessed December 27, 2017).

London Jazz News. "London Jazz Festival Review: Esperanza Spalding." Last modified November 14, 2010. <http://www.londonjazznews.com/2010/11/london-jazz-festival-review-2-esperanza.html>.

MusicOMH. "Esperanza Spalding @ Barbican, London." Last modified April 8, 2011. <https://www.musicomh.com/reviews/live/esperanza-spalding-barbican-london>.

No Treble. "A Review of Esperanza Spalding's 'Chamber Music Society'." Last modified August 17, 2010. <http://www.notreble.com/buzz/2010/08/17/a-review-esperanza-spaldings-chamber-music-society/>.

PopMatters. "Esperanza Spalding: Chamber Music Society." Last modified August 16, 2010. <https://www.popmatters.com/129087-esperanza-spalding-chamber-music-society-2496159684.html>.

Spalding, Esperanza. *Chamber Music Society*. Cleveland: Heads Up, 2010.

Spalding, Esperanza. "Esperanza Spalding: It Takes a 'Society'." Interview by Michelle Norris. *All Things Considered*. NPR, August 20, 2010. Audio, 0:00-12:58. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129323549>.

Spalding, Esperanza. "Esperanza Spalding: Interview." Interview by Michael Gonzales. *The Telegraph*, March 27, 2011. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/worldfolkandjazz/8402191/Esperanza-Spalding-interview.html>.

Spalding, Esperanza. "Esperanza Spalding on Prince and 'Chamber Music'." Interview by Hillary Crosley. *Essence Magazine*, August 17, 2010. <https://www.essence.com/2010/08/17/esperanza-spalding>.

Spalding, Esperanza. "One on One: Esperanza Spalding." Interview by Riz Khan. *Al Jazeera English*, September 18, 2010. Video, 0:00-22:43.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=duiDsimsJLk&t=182s>.

Spalding, Esperanza. "The Rookie of the Year, One Year Wiser." Interview by Nate Chinen. *The New York Times*, March 16, 2012.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/18/arts/music/esperanza-spalding-on-a-year-in-the-spotlight.html>.

The Telegraph. "Esperanza Spalding, Barbican, review." Last modified April 11, 2011. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/live-music-reviews/8442487/Esperanza-Spalding-Barbican-review.html>.

Secondary sources:

Assmann, Aleida. "From 'Canon and Archive'." In *The Collective Memory Reader*, edited by Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Daniel Levy, 334-337. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Baham III, Nicholas L. "'I Know You Know': Esperanza Spalding's Hybrid, Intertextual, Multilingual, Relevant Jazz Aesthetic." *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture (1900-present)* 11, no. 2 (2012).

http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/fall_2012/baham.htm. (Accessed October 4, 2017).

Baron, John H. *Intimate Music: A History of the Idea of Chamber Music*. Stuyvesant: Pendragon Press, 1998.

Barrett, Sam. "Classical Music, Modal Jazz and the Making of *Kind of Blue*." *Tijdschrift voor muziektheorie* 16, no. 1 (2011): 53-63.

Born, Georgina, Eric Lewis and Will Straw, ed. *Improvisation and Social Aesthetics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

DeNora, Tia. *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius: Musical Politics in Vienna, 1792-1803*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

DeVeaux, Scott. "Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography." *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 3 (1991): 525-560.

Goehr, Lydia. *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Heile, Björn. "Uri Caine's Mahler: Jazz, Tradition and Identity." *Twentieth-Century Music* 4, no. 2 (2007): 229-255.

Joyner, David. "Analyzing Third Stream." *Contemporary Music Review* 19, no. 1 (2000): 63-87.

Kivy, Peter. *The Possessor and the Possessed: Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, and the Idea of Musical Genius*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2001.

Lopes, Paul. *The Rise of a Jazz Art World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Monson, Ingrid T. *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Monson, Ingrid T. "The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no. 3 (1995): 396-422.

Negus, Keith and Michael Pickering. "Genius." In *Creativity, Communication and Cultural Value*, 123-142. London: SAGE Publications, 2008. Accessed November 7, 2017. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Parakilas, James. "Classical Music as Popular Music." *The Journal of Musicology* 3, no. 1 (1984): 1-18.

Pendle, Karen. *Women and Music: A History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.

Peretti, Burton W. *The Creation of Jazz*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992.

Pickering, Michael and Keith Negus. "Rethinking Creative Genius." *Popular Music* 23, no. 2 (2004): 198-203.

Radice, Mark A. *Chamber Music: An Essential History*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012.

Rudinow, Joel. "Race, Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity: Can White People Sing the Blues?" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52, no. 1 (1994): 127-137.

Stowell, Robin, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the String Quartet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Tucker, Sherrie. "Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies." *Current Musicology* 71-73 (2001-2002): 375-408.

Wehr, Erin L. "Women in Jazz." *International Journal of Music Education* 34, no. 4 (2016): 472-487.