

# Female Leadership in Serbian Metal Music. Frontwomen at the Crossroads of Visibility, Genre and Voice<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *Metal music is known for being, in the words of sociologist Deena Weinstein (2000: 134), a genre primarily designed “(...) of, by, and for males”. Although its foundational postulates, sound and behavior are traditionally seen as masculine, this genre has been also a place for subversion of the masculine and transgression into androgyny and femininity. Since its inception in the 1970s, metal offered a myriad of possibilities for male performers. It is, thus, not surprising that during the first several decades of the genre’s development, women were mainly part of the audience or male musicians’ muses. This trend is more noticeably being challenged in the last two decades. Women are taking on not only the role of band vocalists (which is traditionally expected), but also the symbolic leadership as guitar players and other instrumentalists. This chapter sheds light on the historical circumstances and characteristics of female leadership in Serbian metal, focusing on the development of metal subgenres and their relationship to women in the local and international context. Since female roles in metal bands are still, by and large, the ones of vocalists, this chapter also gives insights into the development of female voice in metal – from mainstream clean and operatic singing in symphonic metal to the technically extended vocals of extreme metal.*

**Keywords:** *Serbian metal music, metal frontwomen, women in metal, voice, extreme metal, symphonic metal.*

To introduce the topic of this chapter, I refer the reader’s attention to one typical example of metal music “best of” top lists, namely, Loudwire’s “Top 50 Metal Bands of all Time” from 2016, which, like many similar ones, praises the world-renowned and now mainstream bands such as Black Sabbath, Iron Maiden, Metallica, Judas Priest, Slayer, Pantera, Motorhead, Dio, as well as pleiad of more extreme metal acts such as Death, Cannibal Corpse, Morbid Angel, Carcass, Behemoth, and so on. Within these bands, it is

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not very difficult to notice the lack of gender diversity. This list gives an idea of the position of women in various subgenres of metal music: from heavy, thrash, to death and black metal, not one woman made it to the list. However, although this sample is not entirely exaggerated, the history and contemporaneity of metal are colored with a number of women, not only in the audience, but also as influential figures and leaders, both globally and in the Serbian context. In this chapter, I examine the presence and position of women as front-figures in metal in two ways: through the historical and factual view of the frequency of appearance and features of women in metal, and then through the prism of vocal techniques they use, viewed through the lens of philosophy of voice and the implications of vocal pedagogy. My goal is to demonstrate how female vocal leaders in metal gradually “conquered” the realm of vocal frontmanship within the dominantly masculine genre, as well as the area of “aggressive”, extreme vocals over the decades. The overview of the development of female frontmanship in Serbian metal also points out how this local, small-scale scene reflects the tendencies of the international scene.

## Women in Metal Music

Although its origins can be traced to psychedelic and acid rock and the African-American blues music of the 1960s, as well as in the musicianship of figures such as Jimmy Hendrix and James Brown, it is common to locate the beginning of heavy metal in the 1970s, in the musical works of white (usually British) musicians copying and building on the urban blues styles (Walser 2014: 9). Heavy metal almost immediately gained popularity amongst the blue-collar, male audience. It is practically impossible to trace the first appearance of the name of this genre that had its mainstream success in the 1980s. However, the term “heavy metal” can be found in the 19th-century vocabulary, having both a technical meaning (in military affairs) and a figurative/social one referring to power, influence, mental or bodily abilities.

Numerous studies were written about masculinity in the metal subculture (Khan-Harris 2007; Walser 2014; Weinstein 2000;). As Deena Weinstein (2000: 134) puts it, this is a genre primarily designed “(...) of, by, and for males”. The issues that ensued from the dominance of masculinity do not connote the metal genre alone. Indeed, these issues are recognizable in metal’s immediate predecessors, rock and hard rock music, where sexism is evident in lyrics, music videos, and behavior towards women.<sup>2</sup>

While discussing masculinity and gender in heavy metal music, in his seminal study of metal *Running with the Devil* (1993), Robert Walser writes that, since around 1987, a gender balance throughout metal concert audiences can be noted. However, “metal is overwhelmingly concerned with presenting images and confronting anxieties that have been traditionally understood as peculiar to men, through musical means that have been conventionally coded as masculine” (Walser 2014: 110). The aggression emerging from metal’s

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2 It should also be noted here that sexism in rock became the subject of academic scrutiny ever since Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie’s study in 1978.

“big wall of sound”, high volume, and distortion is conventionally coded as masculine in music.<sup>3</sup>

As argued by Keith Kahn-Harris (2007: 160), the marginality of women and non-binary people within the extreme metal scene is “not necessarily any more severe than in other contemporary music scenes”. However, that is not always the case. Some subgenres, such as death metal, actively foster imagery of violence, mutilations, sexual assaults, and so on, in many cases directed explicitly towards women (Vasan 2011: 333–334). Given that women nevertheless listen to this genre, Sonia Vasan explored the possible reasons for “women’s *knowing* participation” in this subculture, with conclusions that this environment in a way empowers women and frees them from mainstream society expectations. This freedom, however, comes at the cost of “submitting to the masculinist codes of the subculture” (Vasan 2011: 334). As fans and musicians, women treat their femininity and compliance to essentialist gender stances as capital for participation in the scene. Rosemary Lucy Hill (2018: 266) emphasizes the discrepancy between academic discourse claiming that metal is sexist and the fans who insist that it is not. Nevertheless, Hill (2018: 269–270) points to the aspects in which said stance towards women is most visible: the objectification of women and “personal shortcomings” (the experience of sexism is sometimes seen as justified, connected mostly to the biological gender differences, see more in Powell and Sang 2015) in mosh pit or concert-going in general. It is also not uncommon for male fans to subject their female counterparts to a more rigorous examination about their knowledge of the history of metal, facts about metal albums and songs, etc. as a way of gatekeeping. However, many female metal fans do not see the problem in the chivalry or the essentialist approach to gender roles in the context of the metal scene (Hill 2018: 272). Similarly, female fans underline the feeling of safety from sexual harassment or unwanted advances, which ensues not only from the general idea of equality or chivalry, but also from the fact that male metal fans are primarily “there for the music” (Hill 2018: 272).<sup>4</sup>

Commenting on Walser’s note that “(h)heavy metal is, inevitably, a discourse shaped by patriarchy” (2014: 109), Heather Savigny and Sam Sleight (2015: 344) point out that “there is nothing inevitable about this” and that this is more a case of, speaking in Judith Butler’s terms, the performance of gender and not something inherent or natural. In metal – as in other music genres – masculinity is constructed through performance on the scene and in media in numerous and complex ways (Savigny and Sleight 2015: 244). Having that in mind, the metal subculture can also be a place where the concept of masculinity is challenged and subverted through performing androgyny and femininity, albeit these performances are almost always reserved for men. Androgyny, femininity, or, more generally, any type of transgression is performed in metal through various channels – visual, discursive, or sonic. One of the most prominent forms of transgression, especially regarding 1980s heavy and glam metal, is vocal transgression: clean male singing voices in the higher range, asserting dominance over the sonic picture of the rest of the band in what can be seen as female vocal range and space.

3 See more about the specificities in metal music sound production: Wallmark 2018.

4 It is also possible that some women who participated in the interviews did not want to name sexist behavior “due to the risk of alienating other hard rock and metal fans” (Hill 2018: 273).

The conquering of the feminine or, in other respects, *othering* traits in some metal subgenres did not, however, diminish the initial and cornerstone, dominantly masculine ideal of the genre. When it comes to women musicians in metal, one of the more extreme examples of the two-faced male subculture behavior and male aggression towards women in the scene/on the stage of recent years is seen in the case of Danish experimental black/folk metal band Myrkur, led by singer and multi-instrumentalist Amalie Bruun. On one side, her one-woman project released in 2014 was critically acclaimed, while a certain part of the black metal community, mostly American, white, and male, proceeded to send her death threats on accounts of her being a woman in a male-dominated community.

The models of behavior and relationships to women metal fans transfer to female performers – instrumentalists as well as vocalists. With the genre representing a masculine, rugged, and potent symbol of meaning and music production, women performers – and most notably instrumentalists – can still be evaluated based on the criteria of upholding the perceived standard of the majority, i.e., their male colleagues. Phrases like, for example, “playing like a man” are consistently considered the highest compliments to one’s performing skills. Admittedly, metal culture is not isolated or exceptional in this mode of thinking. Speaking of the alternative and underground culture and certain areas of traditional music, one can see that similar discursive figures are not uncommon. Female instrumentalists are often viewed through the prism of the deep-rooted idea that ties women to intimacy, home, private, chamber music – and most notably, usually vocal spheres of musicking. It is noticeable that the overall picture of popular music, be it commercial, alternative, or underground, is slowly changing in terms of gender representation and participation in music production. However, having in mind the initial preposition in the metal genre of required masculinity, strength, power, and aggression, it is perhaps even more interesting to investigate the ways in which women are conquering spaces in domains of participation and even leadership.

In most cases, the point of intersection of leadership and front(wo)manship in metal (as in other related genres) refers to the position of vocalists. Considering the already mentioned insistent general historical connection between women and voice in performance, this point is also made more complex by including specific vocal techniques required for the performance of (extreme) metal music.

Setting aside the visual and verbal discourse for the moment, the singer’s voice is one of the main channels and mediums for performing masculinity, femininity, power, normalcy, or monstrosity in metal music. Transgression into the *other* is achieved by using the high male voices with bountiful vibrato in heavy metal, screams and screeches, more elaborate growl and scream techniques in extreme metal genres, or female sopranos singing in the bel canto technique. Women have been singing and growling since the 1980s – take for example Sabina Classen from Holy Moses, who is credited with some of the first growls in metal, and Doro from Warlock (later, Doro). The expansion of female vocals in terms of the number of women on the scene and the performing style, however, has come later.

Since the appearance of heavy metal in former Yugoslavia in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and up until the early 2000s, women performers in metal in this region were extremely rare. Namely, some of the greatest and most popular Yugoslav heavy metal

bands in the 1990s such as Divlje jagode, Gordi, Pomaranča, Osmi putnik, and later – with the development of speed, thrash, and early death metal – Heller (thrash/speed, Belgrade, 1984–1993, 2013–2019), Bloodbath (death/thrash, Belgrade, 1988–1995), Bombarder (speed/thrash, Sarajevo/Belgrade, 1986–1992, 1996–), Sanatorium (thrash/speed, Skopje, 1987–2004, 2011–), Mortuary (old school death, Kragujevac, 1990–1995), all had exclusively male members. The development of the metal scene in Yugoslavia reflected the state and potential of the genre on a global level. The dominance of masculinity was evident in metal and more broadly encompassed guitar-based genres such as Yugoslav rock'n'roll, alternative rock and new wave during the 1980s and 1990s (Nenić 2015: 137). The occurrence of women instrumentalists in alternative bands was mostly considered transgressive of gender norms and expectations in music, which was also recognized in the discourse of music journalism (Nenić 2015: 137).

During the 1990s, the scene grew and developed in diverse genre strains. Nevertheless, the ideas of all-female metal bands (such as, for example, Serbian hardcore band P.M.S.), or more numerous female band members were still foreign.

## Frontwomanship and Voice

Unpacking the female voice in metal in more detail can benefit from insights made by philosophy, history, theoretical psychoanalysis, and vocal pedagogy. Furthermore, it requires deepening our understanding of the relationships between voice and body, voice and language, voice and subjectivity. In these knowledge networks, we discover the tendencies that philosophy and other disciplines in humanities harbored over millennia: to silence the “female domains” of voice, body and music in favor of “male domains” of written language, *logos* and thinking. The phrase “woman sings, man thinks”, written by Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero (2005: 6), sums it up quite nicely. Just as the tides have started turning with the *vocal turn* in humanities – which can be described as the result of the intensification of interest in voice in theoretical psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, and later on, performance studies in the 20th century, when voice became a valid research subject and a window to scrutinization of various issues in humanities (see Kane 2015) – the voice in metal, almost paradoxically, became the place of asserting dominance.

Two types of vocalization in metal music can be discerned. The first type, a more common and mainstream one, includes clean singing and “raspy”, somewhat distorted, vocals. The second type of vocalization encompasses a wide variety of extreme metal vocals that rely on extended vocal techniques. Although the first type is, by all means, not exclusive to metal, the other one is proudly presented as the sonic genre identifier for many extreme metal strains such as death, black and doom metal, grindcore, and numerous subgenres. Given the emanated and perceived aggression of vocal techniques typical of extreme metal subgenres, it was expected by general metal fandom – given the deeply ingrained notion of female (physical) fragility – that more female vocalists perform with a clean singing voice. However, the rising number of female vocalists in extreme metal has been evident in the last couple of decades.

Extreme vocalizations, however, pose before listeners the riddle of who is performing because the gender of the performer is not evident in the sonic picture of the extreme voice. The distorted sound experience, which leaves behind the clear singing melody and resides on the vocal techniques and behavior usually considered unpleasant, monstrous, and unregulated by the social conventions, thus hides not only the performer's gender identity, but also "plays the card" of introducing a non-human, animalistic element, so proudly embraced by the extreme metal community. Therefore, this can easily become the point in which female vocalists transgress the expectations imposed on them of clean, pleasant and likeable vocalizations and reach the point of sonic equality with their male colleagues. While this is the case for the most extreme of the subgenres, in other areas of metal, female vocal leaders have also been broadening the range of desirable vocal behavior.

It can be said that, although during the 1990s more women were getting involved in metal as performers – and especially in the position of the vocalist – two figures influenced female-led metal bands at the turn of the century for the decades to come. Those were, in order of appearance on the scene, Finnish opera singer Tarja Turunen, one of the co-founders of the band Nightwish, where she was active from 1996 to 2005, and German death growl vocalist Angela Gossow, the second vocalist of the US band Arch Enemy (2000–2014). Both these vocals were unconventional in the context of metal music nearing the end of the 20th century. On the one hand, classically trained bel canto singer Tarja transgressed the usual vocal practices and techniques used by women in metal and other genres such as belting and distorted singing. On the other hand, Gossow managed to produce the death growl, a *monstrous voice*, a voice that sounds like it does not belong to that (human, and more specifically, female) body.

The appearance of Nightwish and Tarja as a novelty in the domain of (female) metal vocals propelled the development of a specific symphonic/power subgenre of metal that leaned on operatic voices, classical instrumentation additions to the standard band structure, and epic stories and fantasies. In the early 2000s, the metal scene in Serbia started to diversify and include more female vocalists (see Table 1), especially those influenced by Nightwish's worldwide success. Bands like Abonos and Moondive, which resorted to multiple, female and male vocals, were among the more prominent acts, working within the globally popular symphonic metal genre. Besides the obvious and open references to the trends of female operatic vocal lead, these acts have also shown the traits of elitism, connections with high art and art music, and an interest in (Slavic) mythology and the medieval past. Aside from them, there were numerous tribute bands and some groups who never released their own material.

Following the development path of extreme metal, it is worth mentioning that Kramp, an old-school death metal band from Belgrade formed in 1999, had the extreme metal vocalist Ivana Savić, who continued her career in several other bands after the band's dismissal. During the following decade, although much shyer than in symphonic metal, metal bands with women singing harsher and fry, death vocals, started to emerge in larger numbers (Rain Delay, Odium Inc., Awaiting Fear, etc.).

Entering the second decade of the 21st century, a certain level of diversification and "progress" is noticeable in regard to frontwomen and women in metal in general. In 2013 two all-female metal bands were formed, which are still active today – speed/thrash

band Jenner and melodic death metal band Nemesis. The vocalists of these groups practice singing with distortion and extreme vocal techniques, respectively. Furthermore, in the 2010s, trained vocalists such as Bojana Milosavljević (Rain Delay) and Aleksandra Đelmaš (Destiny Potato) started combining clean, pop-like voices with harsher, belting techniques and controlled screams. This – almost scholarly – attentive and careful approach to extreme metal techniques is likewise noticeable in contemporary extreme metal. Namely, Nemesis vocalist Sanja Drča attended masterclasses by Melissa Cross and Angela Gossow and learned to shape her false cord vocals and (fry) screams according to their pedagogical approach.

By shaping their voices in line with international trends and their role-models, these vocalists demonstrate the need for taking over the agency of their own sonic presence and leadership on stage. Moreover, the integration of extreme vocals in the repertoire of possible female vocal behaviors is a sign of embracing and incarnating transgressive femininities – the one that recognizes the manifold reality of being a woman in metal music. Aside from the voice and sound itself, some of the bands, such as Nemesis, are also outspoken about the feminist values and social issues in their song themes and concepts, as well as other public appearances. This adds a much-needed female perspective to, for example, death metal music, which is already marked as being explicit about and engaged in socio-political themes.

## Conclusion

The lack of women in extreme metal during the 1990s and the early 2000s, even in the position of vocalists is interestingly illustrated in the famous instructional DVD releases *The Zen of Screaming I and II*. These publications were intended and designed as introductory material for extreme vocalists with video explanations of the performing technique, guests – famous metal vocalists – who attended the vocal lectures and gave interviews for this release, and additional audio material with vocal exercises. Namely, in 2007 vocal coach, instructor and the writer of *The Zen of Screaming*, Melissa Cross defined the division between fry screaming and false cords as more suitable for tenors and baritones, respectively, showing that – even though she had Angela Gossow as a guest and a student in the video – the state of the scene did not call for more significant representation of women vocalists in one such project and Cross' classification.

As shown in this condensed overview, compared to the 1980s global scene, as well as in Yugoslavia and, from the 1990s onwards, in Serbia, female vocalists started to gain a more notable position. In addition, the diversification of female vocal output has also become pronounced. As the concept of voice remains one pluralistic knot of identities and knowledge, it is also suitable for (re)negotiations of power and leadership in metal music. Although the voice was already a polygon for transgression in the male metal vocalists' practices of heavy, glam, and, later on, extreme metal, the task for frontwomen vocalists was not only to reclaim their feminine, bodily, ephemeral position of a singer but to transform it from within. The transformation has been twofold: on the one hand, by way of introducing the female bel canto in metal, on the other hand, by mastering the extreme voice. Compared to the previous understanding of what female voice and

vocal leadership in metal and other music genres can perform (usually associated with the characteristics found also in bel canto), the inclusion or, better yet, mastery of the extreme vocalization works towards the understanding of diverse – and not always conventionally feminine, private and “proper” – modes of womanhood. In that context, the tendency for growth and development in both directions and the request and necessity for diversification of metal voice is notably seen in the international framework as well as in the Serbian metal scene which is humbler in terms of logistics and number of active participants. As a result of “catching up to” or even determining the direction of that trend, female Serbian metal leaders and vocalists are deserving of the audience’s and scholarly attention, to which this text hopefully will contribute.

Table 1: Serbian bands with female vocalists.

Band	Active years	Genre	Vocalist(s)	Type of vocals	Additional remarks
Claymore / Claymorean	1994–2003, 2012–2014, 2014–	epic power / symphonic	Dejana Betsa Garčević (since 2012)	clean, bel canto/operatic	added a female vocal in 2012
Kramp	1999–?	Death Metal/ Grindcore	Ivana Savić	fry scream	another male vocal, growl technique
Abonos	1999- (on hold)	Gothic/ Symphonic/ Thrash	Marija Dokmanović and Marta Vlahović	clean, bel canto/operatic	Dokmanović also played the keyboards
Moondive	2001–?	power/progressive	Smiljka Milosavljević (2001–2005), Marija Hadži-Ilić (backing), Maja Gajić (backing), Anita Gvozdić (2006–?)	clean/operatic/bel canto	/
Rain Delay	?2003–	fusion metal	Ana Pešić, Aleksandra Sana Rasulić, Bojana Milosavljević (2009–12)	clean; clean; cleanandscream	guitarist/vocalist Pešić presents herself as frontman
Odium Inc.	2005–?	melodic death	Romana Dević	growl, false cords	/
Awaiting Fear	2007–2014	death metal	Alisa Cerić	Growl	female vocal only

Destiny Potato/ Sordid Pink	?2011–	pop / progressive / djent	Aleksandra Đelmaš	clean, scream	female vocal only
Sakramen- tum	2011–2015	symphonic black/death	Ivana Savić	fry scream	/
Nemesis	2013–	melodic death metal	Sanja Drča	false cord, fry scream	all-female band
Jenner	2013–	Speed/ Thrash Metal	Anđelina Mitić (2013–19), Aleksandra Stamenković (2019–)	clean, clean with distortion	all-female band

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