This chapter draws on recent developments in gender studies and examines the implications and consequences of gender sensitive approaches for the construction of a music history of the GDR. The chapter begins with a discussion of practical gender relations in the GDR, exploring the marginalisation of the female in a society that prided itself on gender equality but was deeply patriarchal. It then considers the impact of these gendered social constructs on the aesthetics of socialist realism.

Recent developments in gender studies have served as a prominent stimulus for musicologists to rethink fundamental approaches to historiography. Most notably, the traditional concept of the cultural canon as a set of masterworks has been challenged. Questions have been asked about the value choices inherent in the canon: why are certain works deemed worthy of continued performance and reflection when others are neglected or lost? What does this reveal about a culture and its self-conception? Which concepts of marginalisation and exclusion are at work and how can alternative cultural memories be constructed? The consequence of this ‘rethinking’ has been an intensified focus on what is apparently marginal, placed at the periphery of culture. (Similarities can be observed between this approach and postmodern tenets of historiography.) Beginning with the question of why female composers and performers are largely absent from cultural memory, musicologists since the 1970s have begun to explore the relevance of a ‘female music history’. There has been a move away from the reified composition and an increased interest in cultural practices, drawing attention to the roles of women as patrons, concert organisers, writers on music and salon hosts. This change of focus has resulted in a new understanding that music as a cultural and social practice can only be analysed in the wider context of human society. In the following essay I want to examine the implications and consequences of gender-sensitive approaches for the construction of a music history of the GDR. I will begin with a discussion of practical gender relations within the state and will then explore the impact of these social constructs on the aesthetics of
socialist realism. Central to this approach is the realisation that there are multiple interrelated gender discourses at play.

**Female Composers in the GDR**

In stark contrast to official claims and despite the gender equality that was nominally enshrined in GDR laws, the state was a male-dominated one. Of course, women were integrated into and accepted within the working world. They were employed in industry and were celebrated by state officials, not least in numerous speeches by Walter Ulbricht. Decisions, however, were made almost completely by men; telling in this regard was the notable absence of women in the upper echelons of the GDR’s political machine. While women could become crane drivers and technical assistants, men seldom engaged with domestic work or child care. The resulting inequalities have been well documented. Similar conditions can be observed in the structures of GDR musical life, where Ruth Zechlin (1926-2007) was the only female composer to enjoy genuine success at both domestic and international levels. Professor of composition at the Hochschule für Musik Hanns Eisler Berlin and teacher of a master class in composition at the Akademie der Künste, she was inevitably hailed both as a female figurehead and as an alibi for socialist culture. Zechlin was well aware of the role she had to play in confirming the narratives of equality associated with socialism, but it is telling that she believed she had inherited her mathematical combinatorial approach to composition from her father. Her skills, according to Zechlin, were inherently masculine. Accordingly, she ascribed the shortage of female composers in the GDR to a ‘physiologisches Phänomen’, maintaining that if women had the faculty to compose, they would have long played a prominent part in musical life. Emancipation, she claimed, was not the issue: ‘Das Frauenproblem ist in der DDR weitgehend gelöst. Wer und was aufgeführt wird, ist keine Frage der Emanzipation, sondern allein der Qualität.’ In a 1988 survey of female musicians in the GDR, published in the journal *Musik und Gesellschaft*, Zechlin explained:

> Ich denke, ich bin der lebendige Beweis dafür, daß man als Frau in unserem Lande alles tun kann – vorausgesetzt, daß man mit größter Verantwortung, mit Phantasie und Kühnheit sowie mit echtem handwerklichen Können unverwechselbare und persönliche neue Musik schreibt.