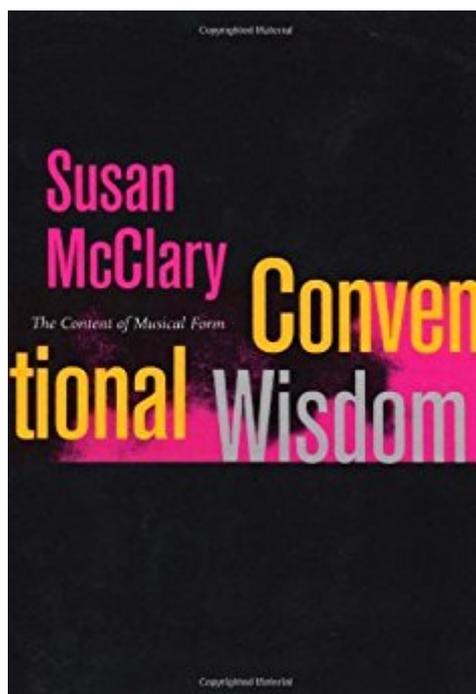


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# Conventional Wisdom: The Content Of Musical Form (Ernest Bloch Lectures)



## Synopsis

With her usual combination of erudition, innovation, and spirited prose, Susan McClary reexamines the concept of musical convention in this fast-moving and refreshingly accessible book. Exploring the ways that shared musical practices transmit social knowledge, *Conventional Wisdom* offers an account of our own cultural moment in terms of two dominant traditions: tonality and blues. McClary looks at musical history from new and unexpected angles and moves easily across a broad range of repertoires--the blues, eighteenth-century tonal music, late Beethoven, and rap. As one of the most influential trailblazers in contemporary musical understanding, McClary once again moves beyond the borders of the "purely musical" into the larger world of history and society, and beyond the idea of a socially stratified core canon toward a musical pluralism. Those who know McClary only as a feminist writer will discover her many other sides, but not at the expense of gender issues, which are smoothly integrated into the general argument. In considering the need for a different way of telling the story of Western music, *Conventional Wisdom* bravely tackles big issues concerning classical, popular, and postmodern repertoires and their relations to the broader musical worlds that create and enjoy them.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

If you ever met Susan McClary, you'd find it hard to believe that this petite, soft-spoken, witty woman could inspire such ardent hatred from scores of musicologists. Moreover, the sociological and feminist concepts that she brings to bear on Western art music are already old hat in literary and art criticism. But musicology is, to a large extent, still in denial about Modernism, so Post-Modernism is way beyond the pale. So McClary's first book, "Feminine Endings," rocked the world of musicology to its hardbound, white-male foundation, and provoked round after round of McClary-bashing. Her new book, based on a series of lectures given at UC Berkeley, therefore occasionally sounds a bit defensive. (At one point she notes that she *can* say something nice about Beethoven, as if pointing out the sexual agenda in the 9th Symphony needed an apology.) For any reasonably intelligent reader who has wondered how Western music works, this new book is superb at explaining those mechanisms. McClary uses her usual catholic tastes to discuss everything from Vivaldi to the Blues, and you will come away understand how both of them function, and why we feel moved when listening to either one. Armed with her usual wit and unusual perceptivity, McClary lays bare the workings of Western music with clarity and grace. In the process, she nearly redeems musicology as a discipline worth taking seriously. You go, girl.

During an analysis of a Stradella aria, McClary discusses how the music which starts in a sunny mood (in a major key) moves to a relative minor, and it's as if a cloud has passed overhead. She shows how this modest but effective narrative, dramatic device eventually became a convention (modulation to the relative major or minor) that was so widely used, the dramatic roots became obscured and this modulation began to be taught as a purely "formal" device. Time and again, McClary shows that "form" is not something that is necessarily dry and intellectual, but rather something that serves a very particular purpose, rooted in the needs and desires of society, though often invisible to that society. By bringing to light the conventions that are integral to the work, her analyses offer as many insights into the audiences of their day as they do into the compositional mechanics of the works themselves. Speaking as a classical composer and a performer, I found it inspiring the extent that this book brings music to life. That her analytical methods work as well with Bessie Smith and Prince as they do with Vivaldi and late Beethoven string quartets is a strong plus. Let's live in the whole world of music! I think we have here what will be a highly influential book, or at the least, part of a highly influential and fruitful new trend in musicology. I'm recommending it to all

my composer and performer associates, particularly those of a more analytical bent. It's not always the easiest read. I'd rate it at a "college" (but not necessarily "graduate college") level as opposed to being directed to a more popular audience. Lots of interesting footnotes and citations. But much will be accessible to music lovers with only a little formal musical training. I think having some ability to read music would help (especially if one does not have access to recordings of the works she analyzes).

This book is better than *Feminine Endings*. Its conclusions and assumptions are less questionable, but it also explains her approach in *Feminine Endings*. Only a very basic knowledge of music theory is necessary, I imagine you could have a friend in their first year of music theory explain it to you while you listened to the music she discusses. Yet she explains more than most first year theory classes would.

You know, I don't think this author's or any author's physical appearance is either here or there. And please, let's not take ridicule for "ardent hatred". If you fed an English dictionary into a computer program that generated random permutations, one of the more improbable combinations of words it might spit out could be: "as if pointing out the sexual agenda in the 9th Symphony needed an apology". "The sexual agenda in the 9th Symphony"?

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