Stepping Up

In 2025 filmmaker Céline Schlesser and the research group MuGi.lu (Music and Gender in Luxembourg) proposed to explore the topic of gender boundaries and negotiations by contemporary singer songwriters from Luxembourg. Supported by the production company Kinoshi Studio, Céline obtained funding from the Ministry for Gender Equality and Diversity to do four portraits of musicians she could choose.

The Ministry also agreed to subsidize the publication of her work on the mugi.lu website, with additional research by Cosimo Suglia, who contributed the biographical texts and the following general introduction.

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Introduction

In his song *Pass Me The Crown*, Luxembourgish musician Maz says: "I have your eyes but I don't see the world the same". Considering that this song is part of the album *Little Prince*, published in 2025, the textual similarities and recurring references to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* (1943) are unmistakable. In Saint-Exupéry's work, the prince, after finding a field of roses, though not the one he is searching for and realizing that his rose, in the end, is not unique, returns to the fox and asks for guidance. The fox responds: "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye". Vision and the observation of the material world are faculties shared by all those who possess sight; the understanding of that objective world, however, remains subjective. Maz suggests in the quoted line that even where resemblances exist (and goes as far as "hav[ing] your eyes") the understanding of the world, particularly his own, diverges. Similarly, the fox explains to the little prince that possessing eyes, and thus the capacity to see, cannot alone

fulfill subjective understanding. Seeing is, in this sense, homogeneous, whereas interpretation and understanding are not. The fox further explains to the little prince that "[i]t is the time you have wasted for your rose that makes your rose so important", and although the term *waste* may appear provocative or even somewhat crude, this statement is applicable to the present project and the four musicians who constitute its focus. The little prince's journey is not a waste, but rather a continuous and progressive movement toward a subjective understanding of his world and, ultimately, of himself. The musicians' work and journeys can be understood in similar terms, and (with a degree of creative freedom) I suggest that gender as a category of self-expression, in this case, can be likened to the rose the prince seeks. As explored in the four profiles within this project, the Luxembourgish musicians Maz, C'est Karma, Nicool, and Galnari illustrate their individual journeys, as well as the reciprocal relationship between their music and their engagement with gender.

Stepping Up documents the ways in which the featured musicians have engaged (and continue to engage) with questions of gender and gender roles. It goes without saying that mainstream media presents a wide spectrum of gender performances, often reinforcing preconceived, and widely circulated notions of binary (male/female) gender norms. In other words, the music industry (particularly within mainstream media) offers an abundance of gender stereotypes. This is evident, for instance, in hip-hop, where a reciprocal relationship between violence, anger, and forms of toxic masculinity frequently emerges, often accompanied by the objectification and sexualization of femininity and female artists. At the same time, such representations may be strategically reappropriated by female artists as a means of empowerment. Similarly, pop music is often dominated by female artists whose publicized romantic relationships and emotional experiences become central themes of their artistic production. These tendencies, however, are not exhaustive but rather represent recurring stereotypes within a vast and heterogeneous industry.

Queerness and the question of gender have long exerted a significant influence on mainstream music. Copious examples can be cited, such as the British rock band Queen, or the British singer-songwriter David Bowie, whose fictional character Ziggy Stardust embodies an otherworldly androgynous stage persona and recurring figure throughout his work. More recently, artists such as Frank Ocean – whose 2016 second studio album *Blonde*

has been highly influential within contemporary R&B and soul – or the producer SOPHIE, who has played a formative role in shaping and co-creating the genre of hyperpop, further illustrate this dynamic. Hyperpop, in its more extreme manifestations, at times verges on parody of mainstream media, and by extension, the capitalist structures within which it operates. It has also emerged as a space in which trans women have played a particularly prominent role, including artists such as Laura Les of 100 gecs. While these developments are most visible within mainstream contexts, this project seeks to examine similar dynamics within the Luxembourgish music scene, thereby shifting focus from cultural centers to the periphery, and exploring what it means to step not only outside of gender roles but also beyond dominant cultural frameworks.

A particularly relevant observation is that each of the four artists navigates their respective genres (if they can be clearly categorized into genres) through forms of contrast with mainstream conventions. Maz, for example, draws on rap and adheres to certain formal patterns of the genre, such as double-time and signifying. However, his music is marked by a distinct aesthetic: it combines aggression and anger with vulnerability, replacing traditional hip-hop beats with darker, gothic elements, as well as influences from post-hardcore and emo. Some breakdowns across his tracks are reminiscent of those found in hardcore punk. C'est Karma similarly evolves from indie to pop, and more recently into hyperpop, characterized by distorted and metallic drum patterns, provocative yet accessible lyrics, and a stylistic simplicity that enables a deeper emotional resonance. The multilingual dimension of her work further reinforces its resonance with local audiences, while underscoring that, much like Luxembourg and its population, uniformity is neither assumed nor representative. Alongside questions of gender then, this linguistic plurality gives rise to a distinctive musical practice, as gender itself is likewise diverse and multifaceted. Nicool, in turn, situates herself within a relatively recent Luxembourgish tradition of old-school / boom-bap rap, while simultaneously avoiding mainstream stereotypes and the sexualization often associated with expressions of empowerment. She mobilizes gender as a means of challenging such conventions. Additionally, her project Nikki Ninja presents a particularly compelling case: hip-hop and rap created for children. Here, a genre historically associated with violence and explicit language is recontextualized and repurposed for an entirely different audience. Finally, Galnari exemplifies a striking case: the incorporation of the Japanese style of *gyaru*,

which emerged in the 1970s as a countercultural and rebellious subgenre in Japan, intended to challenge prevailing beauty standards of the time. This aesthetic is recontextualized within a different cultural and temporal setting (that being Luxembourg), and integrated into an amalgamation of DIY-punk, jazz and rap: genres that are typically associated with anger and aggression rather than with a selective constructed hyper-feminine performance. Cultural anthropologist Laura Miller argues that this subculture challenges mainstream notions of gendered language and behaviour and, consequently, mainstream Japanese media represented gyaru girls as deviant and misbehaving.[1] The media response is important because it shows the political dimension of the subculture, gyaru fashion is not simply an aesthetic exaggeration, it is a visible rejection of the expectations placed on young women.

The work of these musicians is not only creative and culturally generative but also demonstrates a high degree of resourcefulness. Although the local music scene is increasingly supported through state-funded initiatives and opportunities, it remains largely characterized by a strong DIY and grassroots ethos (Galnari encompassing this ethos fully). Richard A. Peterson and Andy Bennett, in their book *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual*, distinguish between three types of music scenes: local, translocal, and virtual. While these categories "share a number of characteristics in common", Luxembourg can primarily be understood as a local scene. Peterson and Bennett define a local scene as:

> "[...] to be a focused social activity that takes place in a delimited space and over a specific span of time in which clusters of producers, musicians, and fans realize their common musical taste, collectively distinguishing themselves from others by using music and cultural signs often appropriated from other places, but recombined and developed in ways that come to represent the local scene" [2]

As previously indicated, these characteristics are clearly reflected in the musicians discussed in this project, as their profiles and curated materials demonstrate. However, Luxembourg's local music scene also possesses a distinctive feature: its international dimension. Given that

[1] Laura Miller, "Those Naughty Teenage Girls: Japanese Kogals, Slang, and Media Assessments", *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 14 (2004), p. 225 - 247.

[2] Richard A. Peterson and Andy Benett, "Introducing Music Scenes", in: eidem (eds.), *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual* (Vanderbilt University Press; Nashville, 2004), p. 1-17, here p. 8.

a significant proportion of the population has a migratory background, several musicians incorporate this cultural diversity into their work. Maz, for instance, frequently references Hungary and actively tours there, while C'est Karma explores Portuguese lyrics, thereby integrating linguistic and cultural plurality into her music.

Stepping Up constitutes an initial point of departure for documenting the cultural significance of the contemporary Luxembourgish music scene in relation to, and through, various analytical perspectives. It represents, so to speak, a first step toward an approach in which cultural documentation and archiving are co-created with the musical subjects themselves, and coexist with [or shed light on] the constant transformations of the local Luxembourgish musical landscapes. First steps, however, remain precisely that: first steps and are thus, to a degree, limited. This project should therefore be understood as a beginning: an initiation into the study of contemporary Luxembourgish music (in relation to gender and gender roles). This project ultimately extends an invitation to researchers across disciplines to apply their respective perspectives, theories, frameworks, and analytical tools to this continually evolving cultural local scene.

How to cite: Suglia, Cosimo: "Stepping Up (Introduction)" (30 June 2026), in: Music and Gender in Luxembourg, ed. by Sonja Kmec, Danielle Roster and Anne Schiltz, https://mugi.lu/en/subject/cestkarma (published online 15.10.2026; last accessed ….)