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Music and society

the politics of composition, performance and reception

edited by
RICHARD LEPPERT and SUSAN McCLARY

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Contributors

SIMON FRITH is a senior lecturer in Sociology at the University of Warwick and the author of *Sound effects: youth, leisure and the politics of rock 'n' roll*. As a freelance rock critic he has written for numerous newspapers and magazines on both sides of the Atlantic. From 1982–6 he was rock critic of the London *Sunday Times*, and he currently writes a monthly music column in *The Village Voice*. His most recent research has been on the influence of art schools and art education on British pop music.

RICHARD LEPPERT, co-editor, is Professor of Humanities at the University of Minnesota. His training is in musicology and art history; his scholarship is focused on the iconography of music. His publications include *The theme of music in Flemish paintings of the seventeenth century* and *Arcadia at Versailles: noble amateur musicians and their musettes and hurdy-gurdies at the French court (c. 1660–1789)*. He is currently completing a monograph socio-cultural history of upper-class amateur musicians in eighteenth-century England.

SUSAN MCCLARY, co-editor, is Associate Professor of Musicology and a member of two research centers (Center for Advanced Feminist Studies and Center for Humanistic Studies, for which she was Acting Director, 1985–6) at the University of Minnesota. Her research focuses on the ways in which music both articulates and shapes social values, and her publications include essays on seventeenth-century music, Mozart, and new music. She serves as a frequent consultant to arts organizations on matters related to new forms of music, dance, and theater, and she has recently composed a music-theater piece, *Susanna does the elders*.

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JOHN MOWITT is Assistant Professor of Humanities and English at the University of Minnesota. His work primarily reflects interests in the history and theory of critical method as well as the problematic of the cultural constitution of subjectivity. He has published recently on rhetoric, the cinematic apparatus, and the discipline of the humanities. His current research centers on an effort to clarify the relation between writing and subjectivity embodied in the 'text' as a literary object.

JOHN SHEPHERD is Associate Professor of Music and a Member of the Centre for Communication Culture and Society at Carleton University, Ottawa. He is the author of *Tin Pan Alley* and a co-author of *Whose music? A sociology of musical languages*, and he has published extensively in the areas of the sociology and aesthetics of music, popular music and the sociology of music education. He served as Executive Secretary of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music, 1983–7.

ROSE ROSENGARD SUBOTNIK is currently Visiting Associate Professor of Music at the Graduate Center of The City University of New York. She will join the faculty of the School of Music at the University of Minnesota in the fall of 1987. She formerly taught at the University of Chicago, where she was a Guggenheim Fellow. She has published numerous articles on interdisciplinary aspects of music, including essays on Kant, Adorno, musical semiotics, and the problem of musical criticism.

JANET WOLFF is Reader in Sociology of Culture at the University of Leeds, where she was also co-founder, and first Director, of the Centre for Cultural Studies in 1985. Her work is in the sociology of art, cultural studies, and women and the arts, and her publications include: *Hermeneutic philosophy and the sociology of art, The social production of art*, *Aesthetics and the sociology of art*, and *The art of women* (forthcoming). She has also co-edited a number of volumes, the most recent of which (co-edited with John Seed) is a collection of essays on class, culture and the visual arts in the North of England in the nineteenth century.

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Introduction

The past fifteen years have witnessed a major transformation in the ways in which the arts and humanities are studied. Influenced by such socially and politically grounded enterprises as feminism, semiotics and deconstruction, both the artifacts considered worthy of analysis and the questions asked of canonized works of art have changed radically. These changes, especially evident in studies of literature, film, and visual art, in turn have led to a systematic investigation of the implicit assumptions underlying critical methods of the last two-hundred years, including prominently the assumption that art constitutes an autonomous sphere, separate and insulated from the outside social world.

While the lasting effects of this transformation are impossible to predict and its value and significance is hotly debated and negotiated at the moment,[1] it seems safe to propose that humanistic scholarship will not soon return to the models of self-contained aesthetic enhancement that had characterized it at earlier stages – or at least, if it does, such a return will be marked indelibly as a politically informed choice. Moreover, to the extent that the arts produced during this same time period have been

[1] For recent statements attempting to dismiss or undermine the critical methods of this re-evaluation, see Norman Cantor, 'The real crisis in the humanities today', *The New Criterion*, 3/10 (June, 1985), pp. 28–38, and William J. Bennett, *Reclaiming a legacy* (National Endowment for the Humanities, November, 1984). For a more direct critique of the positions presented in this volume, see Edward Cowan's letter to *Opus* (April, 1986), pp. 3–4, responding to Joseph Horowitz's article on the Music and Society Conference, 'Musical mavericks fume and blaspheme in Minnesota' (October, 1985), pp. 15–17.

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shaped by similar questions and influences, making sense of today's art world demands a full range of the new critical methods.

The only one of the arts that has remained largely untouched by such redefinitions of method and subject matter in its academic discipline is music. For the most part, the discourse of musical scholarship clings stubbornly to a reliance on positivism in historical research and formalism in theory and criticism, with primary attention still focused almost exclusively on the canon. Nevertheless, a few signs that musicology (if not music theory) might be changing along lines pioneered in literary studies have recently appeared. Joseph Kerman's *Contemplating music*, for instance, exposes with admirable clarity both the historical and ideological factors that contributed to the entrenchment of positivism and formalism in American universities.[2] Richard Norton's *Tonality in Western culture* seeks to redefine the central musical language of the 'Great Composers' such that it can be understood as a social construct, rather than as the universal it is frequently asserted to be.[3] In Great Britain, where sociology of the arts has found greater acceptance in the academy, studies by Christopher Ballantine, Christopher Small, and Alan Durant each problematize the inherited boundaries of music scholarship and propose other, more fruitful models to replace them.[4]

The essays in *Music and society* raise a series of complementary questions, foremost among which is that of autonomy itself: the notion that music shapes itself in accordance with self-contained, abstract principles that are unrelated to the outside social world. Not surprisingly, the classic formulations of this issue by Theodor Adorno[5] and Walter Benjamin[6] are repeatedly engaged as well – as points of departure, as support, as models, or as paradigms that themselves are in need of critical examination.

[2] Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating music: challenges to musicology* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), English edition as *Musicology* (London, 1985). Kerman deals extensively in this study with the ideological implications of the canon, and even considers briefly the absence of feminist and deconstructive criticism in musicology (p. 17).

[3] Richard Norton, *Tonality in Western culture* (University Park, Penn., 1984).

[4] Christopher Ballantine, *Music and its social meanings* (New York, 1984); Christopher Small, *Music – society – education* (London, 1980); Alan Durant, *Conditions of music* (Albany, 1984).

[5] See especially Theodor Adorno, *Introduction to the sociology of music*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York, 1976); *Philosophy of modern music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (New York, 1973); *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (1967; reprint ed. Cambridge, Mass., 1981); and 'On the fetish character in music and the regression of listening', *The essential Frankfurt School reader*, eds. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York, 1978), pp. 270–99. The essays by Susan McClary and John Mowitt deal most directly with Adorno.

[6] The work of Benjamin most frequently invoked is 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1969), pp. 217–52. The Adorno–Benjamin controversy is re-examined in considerable detail in Mowitt's piece.

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Briefly stated, the disciplines of music theory and musicology are grounded on the assumption of musical autonomy. They cautiously keep separate considerations of biography, patronage, place and dates from those of musical syntax and structure. Both disciplines likewise claim objectivity, the illusion of which is possible only when the questions considered valid are limited to those that can, in fact, be answered without qualification. The ideology of autonomy also informs the conventional musical reception of the 'music lover' who listens to music precisely in order to withdraw from the real world and to experience what is taken to be authentic subjectivity.

In order to begin making connections between the substance of music and social values, it is necessary first to try to discover the reasons (historical, social, psychological) that its consumers and practitioners cling so tenaciously to the principle of artistic autonomy and to analyze how belief in musical autonomy has shaped the methods, questions, and answers in the reigning histories and theories of music. For alternative models can be proposed and elaborated only after such deconstruction of established paradigms has occurred.

Janet Wolff's Foreword addresses most directly the concept of autonomy in several of the arts through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and she discusses many of the reasons why critics of the other arts have called it into question. In the course of her exposition, she also remarks that music does not present any special problems vis-à-vis its non-representational character and socio-cultural analysis. That remark introduces one of the more interesting tensions of the volume, for most of the essays argue at least implicitly in opposition to this position. Insofar as other art forms are in one way or another abstract or non-representational, Wolff is, of course, correct. But historically, music has been viewed by Western culture by means of an unproblematized paradigm which assumes music's non-representational character as the *sine qua non* from which all further study proceeds. That is a very different position from which to begin analysis than for most other art forms. To what extent does music parallel the other arts in its relationship to society, and to what extent might it indeed constitute a special case? These questions appear throughout the volume, along with the variety of answers that befit the first stages of a new area of inquiry.

A second issue addressed in this collection involves the reinterpretation of Western music along lines suggested by the elimination of the precept of musical autonomy. For it is one thing to decide that music and society are integrally connected and another to demonstrate in concrete detail how that connection is manifested. The essays by McClary, Leppert, Subotnik and Shepherd all are concerned with presenting alternative models to the

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reading of music history and music criticism – models that strive to permit social context and musical discourse to inform one another. This series of particular case studies addresses such matters as the articulation of social values in specific musical repertories and the function of music in social contexts as a means of transmitting dominant ideology. Because such articulations and functions differ widely from time to time and from place to place, each case study requires a different set of observations, relevant source materials, and techniques. In all instances, these essays contribute historical insights as well as self-conscious reflections on method.

Susan McClary uses the celebrations of the 1985 Bach tercentenary as her point of departure. In the course of accounting for Bach's prestigious position in contemporary musical reception, she explores the ways in which music functions differently from literature or the visual arts in Western consciousness (in particular tracing its claim to autonomy back to the Greeks), the peculiar privileging of eighteenth-century cultural products in the current crisis of humanism, the political battles in music theory over definitions of order versus noise, the strategies of silencing alternative voices (of women, of ethnic minorities, of popular culture, of the avant-garde) by means of the classical tradition, and the reification of meaning that necessarily attends the canonization of the Bach repertory. Her thesis is grounded in a historically self-reflexive analysis of two very different examples of Bach's composition (one instrumental, one vocal), treated not simply as organized sounds but rather as instances of socially circumscribed discourses. Her analysis provides a foundation for reinterpretations of Bach's music in performance, and it clarifies the social and musical implications for our own time inherent in the deification of Bach and the uncritical acceptance of his works.

Richard Leppert concentrates on visual representations (especially portraits in oil) of British residents in India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which include notable reference to music. By this means, and also by a discussion of the ideological functions of musical instruments in domestic gender relations, he suggests the uses of music in the economic and social colonization program carried out by the English in India. He reads the 'texts' and 'subtexts' of these images in conjunction with archetypal examples of European Enlightenment music-theory treatises which, in their dual appeal to nature and reason, make tonality appear both universal and objectively superior to any other kind of musical system. Leppert thus demonstrates inherent political and ideological agendas motivating the claim to autonomy in music and disguised in the gentility of portraits and in the apparent theoretical abstraction of the treatises.

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Rose Rosengard Subotnik addresses the piano music of Chopin, a repertory essential to those who would claim music to be devoid of ideological content. She begins with a detailed consideration of autonomy versus contingency in music; she places this issue within the context of debates in academic musicology surrounding methodological positivism and historical contextualism and the implications of both for musical–historical studies. She follows with an examination of contingency in the music of Chopin (thereby challenging its claim to autonomy) by analyzing Chopin's compositional strategies. She proposes that Chopin's music articulates an alternative sense of reality (especially as regards time structuring and social order) than that expressed by other contemporaneous classical music and explores the ways in which the composer is able to manipulate his inherited musical language in order to make this intelligible.

John Shepherd's concern is to understand how the politically personal is articulated from within the internal processes of music and to elaborate a theoretical model whereby 'the parameters of timbre, pitch and rhythm, in both "classical" and "popular" musics, can be linked to male hegemonic processes of gender typing and of cultural reproduction and resistance'. In a discussion of male–female gender relations and cultural reproduction, he stresses that male hegemony is essentially visually constituted. As such, male hegemony has a problematic relationship to sound and especially to music: whereas vision implies separation and distancing, music implies precisely the opposite, namely, the integrative and relational. He argues that timbre 'appears to constitute the nature of sound itself' and that 'the texture, the grain, the tactile quality of sound brings the world into us and reminds us of the social relatedness of humanity . . . Symbolically, it *is* our existence.' He further argues that the issue of timbre tends to be marginalized by formal music theory, which concentrates almost exclusively on pitch in its obsession with objective, rational, visual (masculine) control. Having established timbre as a crucial semiotic dimension in music, Shepherd goes on to compare timbre in 'classical' and 'popular' (especially 'heavy-metal' and 'soft-core' rock) musics and the ways in which these and other repertories manipulate sonorities – the sound itself – to articulate (gender-related) meaning.

John Shepherd's article heralds the third issue explored in the volume: the categories of 'serious' and 'popular' music. These categories are called into question and even collapsed, not only in Shepherd's essay, but also in the chapter by Simon Frith. Traditionally, popular music has been regarded as utilitarian, devoid of aesthetic value, while 'serious' music has been viewed as wholly aesthetic, free of the taint of utility, purpose, or interest-

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edness. The collapse of these conventional categories has several methodological implications. Their demise calls for a historical account of the ideological function of such categories, and it also suggests – or even demands – a crossover of methods: that is, the aesthetic dimension of popular music becomes visible at the same time that the social and political functions of 'serious' music become unavoidable.

In other words, these two repertóries, which were previously held as polar opposites, are put on the same methodological footing and are subjected to the same kinds of questions. It is not coincidental, in fact, that such a collapse in academic categories should happen at a time when musical production itself no longer observes such segregation. To the contemporaries of Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, Steve Reich, Brian Eno, Glenn Branca, and David Byrne, such distinctions seem arbitrary at best, elitist and exclusionary at worst.[7]

Frith's essay reconstructs a set of criteria that underlie the popular evaluation of rock music and suggests an agenda by means of which we can begin to discern how rock articulates meaning, how it organizes our collective sense of time and memory, how it contributes to the social construction of individual identities, and how it is able to be at once socially grounded and resistant to mainstream social norms. He establishes the locus for aesthetic judgment and value in rock music by addressing not only the problematics of its relationship to the demands of the marketplace (the record companies) but also to rock's relationship with its audience of listeners and how that audience is formed. Frith's aesthetic, then, is grounded in society and history and is thus always contingent and problematized by its function as a mass market commodity. At the same time he emphasizes that the 'good' rock song transcends the apparent limitations of its commercial pedigree and posits the means by which this occurs.

The fourth issue examined focuses on the influence of technology and music-distribution patterns on current perceptions and receptions of music. So long as music is understood essentially as autonomous, abstract pitch relationships, then the technologies that produce and reproduce the sounds and the institutions that decide what to perform, publish, broadcast, and so forth remain invisible – or inaudible. They are regarded simply as the means by which the composer's subjectivity comes into contact with

[7] For studies that attempt to deal with both 'serious' and 'popular' repertories together on the same footing, see Durant, *Conditions*; Billy Bergman and Richard Horn, *Recombinant do-re-mi: frontiers of the rock era* (New York, 1985); and John Rockwell, *All American music: composition in the late twentieth century* (New York, 1983).

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that of the listener and that mystical union of composer and listener seemingly will admit of no actual mediation.

Once the processes of mediation become matters for discussion, however, the components of that mystical union fall apart. And perhaps the most disturbing loss in the fragmentation of the traditional model is that of subjectivity itself. The prized illusion that one owns at least one's perceptions, feelings, and individuality gives way to the realization that one is fundamentally shaped by socially produced, reproduced, and transmitted images.

These problems are repeatedly engaged in the volume, but most especially by John Mowitt. Mowitt's essay, whose title bears homage to Walter Benjamin's classic study, investigates various ramifications of electronic technology in sound production, recording, reproduction, and consumption. Introducing the category of 'a structure of listening', he argues for 'the priority of reception within the social determination of musical experience'. He places musical experience within the context of memory and develops a thesis which recognizes not only the social character of subjectivity, but also the fact that experience itself takes place within a cultural context organized by institutions and practices. His ultimate purpose is to raise political issues, in particular to 'sketch out the emancipatory dialectic of contemporary musical reception' relative to electronic technological processes that dominate one or more stages of music's production and reception in the 'developed' world.

Mowitt formulates his argument around a well-known television advertisement, the phenomenon of the recording studio, and the relation of both to cultural formation and consumption. He delineates the ways in which recording organizes the experience of reception, and he posits that the very conditions of reception actually *precede* the moment of production. He draws attention to the importance of seeing as a supplement to hearing, thus complementing a position held by John Shepherd – but also problematizing it, in that Mowitt holds that this primacy is actually in decline. In examining the cultural experience of reception he engages the famous Adorno–Benjamin debate that centered on the cultural experience of mechanically reproduced art and the political implications of the difference between art to be received in a state of contemplation (traditional art forms – 'masterpieces') and that ideally received in a state of 'distraction' (mechanically reproduced art – the photograph, the film – or, for Adorno, mass-marketed popular music, which for him led to 'regressive listening'). Mowitt ends his essay by formulating the ways in which a bit-centered electronic technology, in spite of its 'corporate imprint', permits a reorganiza-

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tion for the ways in which we both receive and produce music, precisely because this technology renders meaningless the previous auratic differentiation between the original and the copy.

Many other issues, equally significant and equally urgent, are not examined extensively in this volume. For instance, it does not deal with the relationships between music and society in non-Western cultures. This omission should not be taken as evidence of ethnocentrism, however. To the contrary, the questions and methods that recur throughout the volume are especially indebted to models developed by ethnomusicologists. For the most part, unfortunately, the findings of ethnomusicology have been acceptable to historical musicology only insofar as they concern *other* cultures. In other words, recognizing that other musics are bound up with social values does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that *our* music likewise might be: more often it simply results in the chauvinistic, ideological reaffirmation of the superiority of Western art, which is still widely held to be autonomous. This volume intends in part to break down the methodological gap between Western musicology and ethnomusicology by demonstrating how Western music, classical and popular alike, is as dependent on social structures and practices as is any other music.

The volume touches only lightly on questions about the music of women, and ethnic and racial minorities. (Feminist issues are treated most directly by Shepherd; McClary includes a section of feminist criticism; Leppert briefly addresses the relationship of domestic gender relations to music. The music of Black musicians is touched upon by both Shepherd and Mowitt, and Leppert's essay deals at length with the imperialist and racist dimensions of Western art and aesthetics.)

It is our hope that the theoretical models presented here have the effect of opening criticism and scholarship to topics that have been blindspots of traditional musicology, many of which were not expressly considered in this volume. As was suggested above, the old historical and theoretical paradigms have to be re-evaluated, modified, or even discarded if the musics of marginalized peoples are to be received on the same methodological footing as the music of the European canon. And that, finally, is our aim.

To begin to acknowledge the ideologies behind the claim to autonomy, the positivism and formalism of the academic disciplines of music, the conventional categories of serious and popular culture, and the impact of technological mediation on present-day perception and reception is to be forced to abandon the traditional uses of Western classical music. But, at

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the same time, it is to grasp how very central music is to our understanding of ourselves. Music passes from the separate sphere of the marginal-if-beautiful into the realities of the social world. If music thereby loses its aura, it is granted both the powers and responsibilities of a genuinely political medium.

RICHARD LEPPERT
SUSAN McCLARY

University of Minnesota

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RICHARD LEPPERT
SUSAN McCLARY

University of Minnesota

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