

## 1 | Music and Politics

### *Key Concepts and Issues*

*Utøya, Norway, 22 July 2011.* Anders Behring Breivik, self-styled commander of the Knights Templar Europe, yells ‘You’re going to die today, Marxists’ as he shoots down teenagers at a summer camp organized by the youth wing of the Norwegian Labour Party.<sup>1</sup> Earlier that day he had car-bombed government buildings in Oslo. Justifying his killing of seventy-seven people to the police who apprehended him, Breivik claimed to be defending Norway and Europe from multiculturalism, Marxism and Islamization, describing his attacks as ‘an expression of love for my own people and country’.<sup>2</sup> In a manifesto released to coincide with the atrocities, Breivik explains the crucial role that music played in developing and reinforcing his extreme right-wing militancy. As well as listing songs which inspired him, he emphasizes the importance of music as an aid to self-indoctrination and motivational control.<sup>3</sup> Dedicating a section of the manifesto to the theme ‘How to Sustain Your High Morale and Motivation for Years through Music’, Breivik describes how the ‘ritual’ of listening to his iPod during extended solitary walks helped to nourish his beliefs and morale.<sup>4</sup> In addition, he explains the functions which music would serve during the different phases of his planned terrorist operation, specifying the tracks suitable for accompanying combat situations and even his anticipated martyrdom. Perhaps surprisingly, there’s no mention of skin-head bands, Black Metal or for that matter Wagner; instead, Breivik cites film and computer game soundtracks which have little or no clear connection to his ideology. Recommending a track from *Lord of the Rings* as ‘very inspiring’ and capable of generating ‘a type of passionate rage within you’, Breivik notes that during the attack, ‘I will put my iPod on max volume as a tool to suppress fear if needed. I might just put *Lux Aeterna* by Clint Mansell on repeat as it is an incredibly powerful song.’<sup>5</sup> While it is not clear whether Breivik stuck to his planned use of music, he had an iPod bud in his ear when police finally cornered him.

*Kiev, Ukraine, 7 December 2013.* Student Markiyan Matsekh and a handful of other demonstrators smuggle a piano into downtown Kiev, setting it down next to a phalanx of riot police protecting the office of the Ukrainian president. Matsekh then plays a musical selection including



**Figure 1.1** ‘The Piano Player’, Euromaidan uprising in Kiev, 2013, photograph by Oleh Matsekh, Markiyan Matsekh and Andrew Meakovski.

Frédéric Chopin’s *Waltz in C-Sharp Minor*, Op. 64 No. 2, Ukrainian folk tunes and the Queen song ‘We Are the Champions’; some of the riot officers sing along and move their heads in time to the music.<sup>6</sup> Within forty-eight hours, a photograph of the event goes viral on social media, inspiring T-shirts and numerous copycat protests (see Figure 1.1). Painted in the blue and yellow of the Ukrainian flag, and sporting the twelve-star emblem of the European Union, Matsekh’s piano gestured defiantly at President Viktor Yanukovich’s decision to ally with Russia and halt Ukrainian integration within the EU. But this protest had a more immediate stimulus, countering the government’s brutal suppression of earlier demonstrations and the stigmatization of protesters as extremists. For Matsekh, the ‘innocence of the piano’ served to convey the peaceful spirit of the opposition movement and to defuse tensions between protesters and police: ‘I painted and rolled the piano in front of the riot police to demonstrate the spirit of the revolution . . . that we are actually trying to change the situation in a peaceful way.’<sup>7</sup> If Matsekh’s aims seem straightforward, his protest was represented in quite different ways by the media. Some commentators treated it as a piece of performance art, while others

ignored the sonic and performative dimensions of the event, focusing solely on the photograph it generated.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the power of the image led to the protest being forced into default media narratives and misread. One tendency was to view it through a universalizing lens as a clash between freedom and repression; another was to depoliticize the protest by reading it as a plea for peace or by drawing on clichéd notions of music as a healing, unifying force.

*Altiplano Prison, Mexico, 11 July 2015.* At around 8:55 pm, billionaire drug lord Joaquín Guzmán, aka ‘El Chapo’ (‘Shorty’), escapes from a maximum security jail through a specially constructed mile-long tunnel. Within hours of his escape, dozens of newly written narcocorridos, or drug ballads, celebrating his feat have begun to circulate on the internet.<sup>9</sup> In spite of Guzmán’s extreme wealth and power, these narcocorridos stress his humble origins and treat him as a Robin Hood figure: a larger-than-life outlaw who had beaten the federales and foiled the attempts of the United States to extradite him. In a few nonchalant sentences, for example, Lupillo Rivera, one of the best-known exponents of the genre, highlighted Guzmán’s ingenuity and bravado, the power of his cartel, the impotence of Mexico’s politicians and the eagerness with which his people await his return.<sup>10</sup> On one level, the elevation of a drug trafficker as a bandit-hero reflects the traditions of the corrido genre, celebrating the wily underdog at the expense of the authorities.<sup>11</sup> But on another, it points to the role music has played in helping to entrench the cartels within Mexico’s poorest regions. The portrayal of Guzmán as a folk hero in these jailbreak ballads evokes a world in which people have come to accept the power wielded by the cartels. A similar tone of acquiescence was projected a few months earlier in a carefully stage-managed protest march following his arrest, with banners reading ‘El Chapo is the defender and protector of the community’ and ‘We love Chapo and respect him more than any law’.<sup>12</sup> Just as these protesters were paid for by Guzmán’s cartel, the singers and bands who honour cartel chiefs through narcocorridos are often commissioned by the traffickers themselves. While these ballads may seem to offer little more than macho bluster, they contribute significantly to what the theorist John P. Sullivan describes as social environment modification; by disseminating and normalizing the values of the cartels, they help to weaken still further state authority and the rule of law.<sup>13</sup>

*Moscow, Russia, 21 February 2012.* Five members of the punk band Pussy Riot, dressed in brightly coloured clothes and balaclavas, burst into the sanctuary of Christ the Saviour Cathedral and perform their song ‘Punk Prayer – Mother of God, Chase Putin Away!’ in front of outraged

worshippers. Later that day a video of the performance is released on YouTube, triggering the detention, trial and conviction of three of the band for ‘hooliganism motivated by religious hatred’.<sup>14</sup> Their arrest and lengthy prison sentences generate widespread condemnation in the West, with celebrities such as Madonna, Elton John and Paul McCartney lining up to support their fellow musicians in the name of freedom of expression.<sup>15</sup> But as the media clamoured to denounce Putin’s Russia, little attention was given to the group’s aims or ideas, while key details of the protest were distorted or passed over. As with Matsekh’s piano protest, the media squeezed Pussy Riot into a narrative of individual freedom versus state oppression, presenting the band as wide-eyed liberals taking on an evil despot.<sup>16</sup> But the members of the band were in no sense naive young rockers who stumbled into trouble with the authorities as a result of their Westernized values. Although feted by mainstream media (the *London Times* gave Pussy Riot the accolade International People of the Year), the group aligned itself with radical anti-capitalist and anarchist standpoints.<sup>17</sup> And rather than being a punk band, or having any connection to the Russian punk scene, Pussy Riot was an activist collective for whom music was just one vehicle for political promotion. Even the grainily authentic YouTube video of the live performance in the cathedral is not quite what it first seemed. The group managed to record only around twelve seconds of the song in the cathedral (the refrain ‘Shit, shit, holy shit’) before being ejected by security guards, and the video versions splice this footage together with a performance in a different venue; far from documenting a live protest event, the video itself was the protest.<sup>18</sup>

These case studies illustrate just a few of the ways in which the spheres of music and politics intersect in our contemporary world. To speak of spheres may suggest that, as in a Venn diagram, music and politics are separate fields with a thin, clearly defined area of overlap – ‘political music’ – shared between them. A couple of the examples discussed above could be made to fit into this rigid conception of political music and shoe-horned into its familiar categories, such as protest music (Pussy Riot’s ‘Punk Prayer’) and propaganda (Guzmán’s narcocorridos). Yet in general the two fields interact more complexly and fluidly than the Venn diagram suggests, and the concept of political music in the conventional sense does not adequately account for their interactions. Breivik’s ‘passionate rage’ was sustained not by music which mirrored his far-right politics but by seemingly innocuous soundtracks; similarly, Matsekh serenaded riot police with a Chopin waltz rather than songs with a clear political message. As these cases attest, the potential for musical texts and materials to function politically goes well

beyond the confines of our conventional notion of political music. The reverse is true too, since if music can temporarily acquire politicality, politics can temporarily acquire musicality: how else can we conceptualize Pussy Riot's twelve-second engagement with punk rock?

The 'and' conjoining music and politics is thus not a fixed boundary or a narrow funnel linking two separate entities. Equally, though, it is not helpful to read the 'and' as a sign of identity (even if it is possible for some forms of music to seem to be political in an unmediated way). While music and politics intermingle across each other's terrain, we need to resist the urge to treat them from the start as one densely entangled whole. To move toward understanding how they interrelate, it makes sense to turn to the most prominent theorist of the 'and', Gilles Deleuze: 'AND is neither one thing nor the other, it's always in-between, between two things; it's the borderline, there's always a border, a line of flight or flow . . . And yet it's along this line of flight that things come to pass, becomings evolve, revolutions take shape.'<sup>19</sup> Here, the 'and' – the myriad kinds of interaction linking the one and the other – is a transformative force of becoming, continually triggering change within the fields it conjoins. Rather than being stable objects, the fields of 'music' and 'politics' are mutating and expanding constantly as a result of their evolving exchanges. And rather than being locked into fixed modes of interaction, music and politics can come together in contingent, temporary alliances.<sup>20</sup> As well as seeking to understand the multiple forms of mediation linking these fields, we need to recognize how new technologies and media have redefined the ways in which they interact (making it possible for a lone extremist to radicalize himself through his iPod and for narcocorridos to be disseminated within minutes of the event that inspired them).

This chapter provides a preliminary map of the ways in which the fields of music and politics relate to one another, introducing and analyzing some of the key concepts and issues that can help us understand how they interact. But before going any further, we need to pin down what we mean by 'politics', not to impose a particular view or eliminate areas from discussion, but rather to make sure that we do justice to all sides of the concept.

## 1.1 Politics and the Political

Definitions of politics – what it encompasses and what is excluded from it – invariably reflect the context and political standpoint of the definer. Indeed, as the philosopher Slavoj Žižek notes, 'every neutralization of some

partial content as “non-political” is a political gesture *par excellence*.<sup>21</sup> From the perspective of contemporary Western liberal democracy (see Box 1.1), politics may seem to comprise a narrow sphere of human activity: the management of public affairs through states, governments and political parties. From this standpoint, as the political scientist Andrew Heywood puts it, ‘politics is what takes place within a polity, a system of social organization centred on the machinery of government’.<sup>22</sup> Since this perspective treats most institutions and practices within a state as non-political, it tends to define politics negatively through what is perceived to fall outside its purview (this approach is at work in phrases such as ‘governments shouldn’t meddle with the economy’, ‘the state shouldn’t interfere with healthcare’, ‘politics and religion don’t mix’ and so on). From this standpoint, the relationship between politics and music might seem no less narrow, revolving around national anthems, the use of music on state occasions, party campaign music, but not much else.

A wider view of politics, however, is suggested by the original derivation of the word from the ancient Greek *politeia*, which encompasses not only the organization and running of the state (*polis*) but public civic life in general. Thus for Aristotle, writing in the fourth century BCE, the collective pursuit of self-perfection and the good life is what defines the political and makes the human being a political animal.<sup>23</sup> This broader conception of politics nonetheless marks out some spheres of human activity as non-political: Aristotle famously differentiated between the ethical and political life (*bios*) of man and natural or bare life (*zoē*), excluding the latter from the *polis* and confining it to the domestic sphere.<sup>24</sup> Some kind of distinction between the public and private domains has been present within political theory ever since, marking out the institutions of the state (the government, the police and justice system and so on) from private, non-political areas of life. Just where the boundary between them is drawn is a fundamental marker of different political systems; a communist, for instance, would place the economy firmly in the public realm, while for a liberal it lies predominantly in the private sphere. Contemporary political scientists tend to insert a third term, civil society, into the public-private equation, using this to accommodate institutions and activities which are not part of the state apparatus yet are public in the broader sense.<sup>25</sup> While civil society includes the spheres of religion and education, it also draws in political institutions that are not part of the state, such as trade unions and social change organizations. From this perspective, the sphere of politics – and therefore also political music – naturally extends beyond government and party politics, encompassing social movements and public forms of artistic activism.



**Box 1.1 Liberalism, Liberal Democracy, Neoliberalism**

The word **liberal** is often used today, particularly in the United States, as a collective term for left-wing progressive and radical ideas. For much of its history, however, **liberalism** has occupied the centre ground within Western democratic politics: on one level, through centrist parties such as the UK Liberal Party (1859–1988), the Liberal Party of Canada (1861–), and the Liberal Party of Australia (1945–), and on another, through the extent to which the core principles and language of liberalism have become common denominators defining mainstream political discourse. This is reflected in the use of the term **liberal democracy** to characterize a form of government in which individual rights and freedoms, safeguarded by the rule of law, are upheld by a freely elected parliament of representatives.

While liberalism has varied substantially since its emergence in the mid-eighteenth century, it has consistently approached politics from an individualist perspective, elevating the liberty, autonomy and rights of the individual over the claims of society. **Classical liberalism** of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries assigned a limited role to the state, conceiving its task as being to safeguard individual rights (religious liberty, freedom of speech, freedom of association) and to protect life and property. This minimalist conception of the state also characterizes the **economic liberalism** of the period, which conceived the capitalist system as a natural order that should be left to follow its own devices (**laissez-faire**) unimpeded by government regulation or interference.

Liberalism’s view of the rights of the individual as universal and its impulse to extend individual freedom gives it a meliorist or reformist dimension which has often been at odds with the idea of the limited state. In the twentieth century, **social liberalism** gave the state a larger role in order to extend equal rights to groups previously denied them, sometimes employing forms of intervention (e.g. affirmative action/positive discrimination) wholly at odds with classical liberalism. Social liberalism also abandoned laissez-faire economics, giving the state a greater role in regulating the economy and in redistributing wealth.

Following the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe (1989–92), the American historian Francis Fukuyama famously proclaimed the global triumph of the ‘liberal idea’ and, with it, the end of the ideological struggles which had characterized the twentieth century.<sup>26</sup> In retrospect, it is clear that this point marked not the end of ideology but the ascendancy of a new one. The liberal idea Fukuyama had in mind was not simply liberal democracy as a form of government but a virulent new strain of economic liberalism epitomized by the policies of the Reagan era in the United States and by Thatcherism in the United Kingdom. These policies centred on facilitating global free trade, curbing government regulation, shrinking state expenditure, enhancing labour market flexibility and so on. But rather than being restricted to the economic sphere, **neoliberalism** made all aspects of government subject to market principles,

**Box 1.1 (cont.)**

rigidly applying them to the public sector (health care, education and even the prison system) and stripping away welfare benefits as disincentives to market participation. Across Europe and North America, neoliberal policies and the idea that market principles should serve as the benchmark for all state operations were adopted by both left- and right-wing parties. Indeed, the consensus around neoliberalism was so entrenched that even following the global financial crisis of 2007–11, it remained largely unchallenged within the political mainstream. Extraordinarily, the ‘solution’ to the crisis adopted by some governments – most notably the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in the United Kingdom – was more of the same neoliberal medicine.

The notion that, as Margaret Thatcher repeatedly put it, ‘there is no alternative’ to the neoliberal order remains hard to shake. One reason for this is the widespread cynicism that the neoliberal consensus has engendered in public attitudes toward parliamentary politics. Another is the extent to which the values of the neoliberal politicoeconomic regime have become naturalized through being mirrored and reinforced across contemporary culture. Citizens have been reduced to consumers and in the process had their political agency constricted (the UK riots of summer 2011 – in which a protest against police brutality and racism degenerated into the looting of designer labels – are emblematic of both developments, demonstrating not only the rioters’ alienation and political impotence but their conformity to the values of consumer culture).<sup>27</sup> This acquiescence is also apparent in the aggressively competitive form of individualism which has spread beyond the workplace to pervade every aspect of life, stifling solidarity as well as attempts to construct alternatives to the status quo. In a provocative recent interpretation, the American historian Mark Lilla has identified this hyper-individualism as a symptom of a broader mindset complementary to neoliberalism: **libertarianism**. For Lilla, this mentality is a dogmatic offshoot of liberalism, taking the latter’s baseline principles of freedom, the primacy of the individual, disinterested tolerance and distrust of the state and asserting them rigidly and unreflectively in every situation.<sup>28</sup> While this combination of neoliberal policies and libertarian principles retain their grip, it is left to forces outside mainstream social and political cultures to imagine alternative worlds.

Much political philosophy from Plato’s *Republic* (c. 380 BCE) to the present has approached politics as the construction of an ideal state, a harmonious, ordered community in which conflict and contestation have melted away. But some radical thinkers have inverted this picture, rejecting such an ‘idyll of consensus’, identifying politics with dissent and locating it anywhere but the state.<sup>29</sup> The British anarchist philosopher Simon



Critchley, for example, maintains that authentic politics must be conducted at a distance from government, elevating protest activism as ethically and democratically superior to parliamentary politics under liberal democracy: ‘Politics, I argue, cannot be confined to the activity of government that maintains order, pacification and security while constantly aiming at consensus. On the contrary, politics is the manifestation of dissensus, the cultivation of anarchic multiplicity that calls into question the authority and legitimacy of the state.’<sup>30</sup> Another contemporary proponent of this kind of revisionist definition of politics is the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, who characterizes the political field as the struggle between what he terms ‘politics’ and the ‘police order’. Under police, Rancière provocatively includes all the forces which maintain a given order of domination – government, justice system, social security and so on – reserving politics for the elements antagonistic to and excluded by that order. Politics thus challenges an existing ‘distribution of the sensible’ (*partage du sensible*) – Rancière’s term for the order governing participation in the public realm – by giving voice to those hitherto denied a place in it:

The police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise . . . Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place’s destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise; it makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise.<sup>31</sup>

Rancière’s distinction reflects a long-standing tradition of defining politics in opposition to the political (a pairing even more confusing in French political theory, which opposes *la politique* and *le politique*).<sup>32</sup> This antithesis is more than just a theoretical conceit, since commentators have used it as a means to challenge exclusionary conceptions of politics and intervene directly in political life. The originator of this opposition was the German right-wing theorist Carl Schmitt, who employed it – shortly before Adolf Hitler’s ascent to power – to critique liberal democracy by driving a wedge between the political and the official sphere of politics. Rejecting narrow conceptions of the political, Schmitt argues that it is an all-pervading dimension of human existence; this dimension is characterized by ‘the most intense and extreme antagonism’, which he refers to as the ‘friend–enemy’ antithesis.<sup>33</sup> Schmitt’s opposition of politics and the political resurfaced following the end of the

Cold War, when for left-wing European thinkers it provided a means to envisage a politics beyond the liberal-democratic consensus. Thus for the post-Marxist theorist Chantal Mouffe, Schmitt's antithesis offers a tool for reconfiguring contemporary democracy in order to facilitate dissent:

By 'the political', I refer to the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations, antagonism that can take many forms and emerge in different types of social relations. 'Politics', on the other side, indicates the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of 'the political'.<sup>34</sup>

Schmitt's and Mouffe's view of the political as inherent in all social relations chimes with the massively expanded conception of politics currently operative in arts and humanities disciplines (including musicology). Over the last half-century, the concept of the political has extended well beyond the state to encompass all aspects of life, a development evident in the various conceptions of biopolitics and 'everyday politics' championed by theorists from Michel Foucault onward.<sup>35</sup> This expansion is also clear from the ever-growing lexicon of concepts which theorists use to locate and characterize the various different modes of politicality and interfaces between culture and politics.<sup>36</sup> All this raises the question of whether everything is political, making it illusory to distinguish between political and non-political cultural products and practices, including music (this issue is addressed at the end of this chapter). Two cautions from the Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson are worth bearing in mind at this point. While it may seem common sense to begin by narrowing down the political into something easily manageable, such an operation risks severely constraining subsequent analyses: 'we are, after all, fragmented beings, living in a host of separate reality compartments simultaneously; in *each one of those* a certain kind of politics is possible.'<sup>37</sup> This notion of multiple coexisting realities will prove invaluable in helping us understand the conjunctions between music and politics. No less important is another caveat from Jameson concerning the expansion of the political field: that recent scholarship, in liberally uncovering politicality across culture, has tended 'in the very heat of this interpretive discovery to assign to overtly political practices or texts a lower level of interest'.<sup>38</sup> In order to be political, music does not need to be connected to the spheres of life customarily fenced off as politics; yet this acknowledgement should not lead us to neglect the more traditional territory of political music.