

# 1 Formulating questions – the ‘music and society’ nexus

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## Music and society – the ‘grand’ tradition

When Howard Becker published *Art Worlds* in 1982, his ‘art as a form of work’ perspective publicized a trend that had been developing in American scholarship since the 1970s. Known as the ‘production of culture’ approach, and developed by scholars such as Richard Peterson (1976), Lewis Coser (1978), Janet Wolff (1981) and Vera Zolberg (1990), this new perspective provided an antidote to the brand of cultural sociology that Bennett Berger cheerfully referred to as ‘culturology’ (Berger 1995). By this, Berger meant a kind of sociology devoted to the ‘reading’ of works or styles so as to ‘uncover’ or decode their social content. In Berger’s eyes, the great virtue of the production approach was its ability to unhook the study of art works from the grand but often imprecise matter of associating styles of art with styles of social being and with patterns of perception and thought.

In relation to music, the most notable exponent of this ‘grand’ approach was T.W. Adorno. For Adorno, music was linked to cognitive habits, modes of consciousness and historical developments. While on the one hand, he refers to music that ‘trains the unconscious for conditioned reflexes’ (Adorno 1976:53), on the other hand, he speaks of music that ‘aid[ed] enlightenment’ (1973:15). For example, the music of Arnold Schoenberg:

demands from the very beginning active and concentrated participation, the most acute attention to simultaneous multiplicity, the renunciation of the customary crutches of a listening which always knows what to expect . . . it requires the listener to spontaneously compose its inner movement and demands of him not mere contemplation but praxis. (1967:149)

Music such as Schoenberg’s, Adorno believed, had the capacity to foster critical consciousness because its materials were organized in ways that countered convention and habit. By avoiding musical cliché, and by preserving dissonance instead of offering musical resolution and gratification, progressive music had the power to challenge cognitive,

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perceptual and emotional habits associated with the rise of 'total socialisation', habits that reinforced, as a matter of reflex, relations of power and administration in ways that made those relations seem natural, inevitable and real.

For Adorno, modern music stood at the end of an historical trajectory, one that began with Beethoven. With its idiosyncratic late style and, in particular, the manner in which it organized musical material, Beethoven's music exemplified or held 'truth-value' for, as Witkin describes it:

the subject confronted with the monolithic administrative force of modernity, of bureaucracy. From this point on, a music that had truth-value could no longer be governed by the illusion of harmony, but would have to recognise the true nature of force in the condition of the subject dominated and even overwhelmed by it. From now on, for the serious modern artist, there could be no more pretence that individual and society were reconciled or that the sensuous life of the subject could find its fulfilment and expression in society; the authentic work of art would henceforth have to reproduce the rupture of subject and object, of individual and society, within itself. (Witkin 1998:67)

As one can glean from this brief description, Adorno's work is exciting and addressed to fundamentally critical issues in the human sciences. Dedicated to exploring the hypothesis that musical organization is a simulacrum for social organization, Adorno's work conceives of music as formative of social consciousness. In this regard, Adorno's work represents the most significant development in the twentieth century of the idea that music is a 'force' in social life, a building material of consciousness and social structure. But because it provides no machinery for viewing these matters as they actually take place, Adorno's work also has the power to frustrate; his work offers no conceptual scaffolding from which to view music in the act of training unconsciousness, no consideration of how music gets into action. The weakness of Adorno's approach thus lies in its failure to provide some means by which its tantalizing claims can be evaluated.

This criticism may be regarded as unfair, since Adorno never claimed to offer a grounded theory of music's effects. None the less, the absence of this grounding was certainly linked to the rejection of Adorno by musicologists of the late 1970s and 1980s (with the lone exception of Rose Subotnik 1976; 1978; 1983; 1990, who, as McClary notes (1991:175n), was 'severely chastised for having thus brought Continental criticism into the discipline'), a time when his work was otherwise enjoying a resurgence within the human sciences (Buck-Morss 1977; DeNora 1986a; Greisman 1976; 1986; Held 1984; Jay 1984; Middleton 1990; Witkin 1998). As one writer within musicology bemoaned, 'one cannot say a *Zeitgeist* reached a

composer or other artist unless one can show the means by which it did' (Lenneberg 1988:419).

Though today the terms are less hostile, less fraught with occupational politics, the debate about Adorno's project is very much alive. From the viewpoint of the empirical historian, the strategy of divining social significance from the work itself (Berger's 'culturology') is fraught with difficulty. This is because it does not account, in any extensive manner, for how the genie of *Zeitgeist* originally got into the bottle of music or, conversely, how music's organizing properties come to be decanted into society. Here, quoted at length, is Peter Martin (quoting in turn Simon Frith) on the problems associated with Adorno's 'grand' approach to the matter of music's presence in social life:

As Frith puts it, the sociology of music, 'has usually rested on more or less crude reflection theories: the music is taken to reflect, to be "homologous" to, the society or social group that makes it'.

As Frith's remark implies, however, there are problematic aspects of the claim that there are close connections between sound structures and social structures. Durkheim's notion of the conscience collective, for example, was developed in the context of an analysis of simple, undifferentiated societies, and, as I have suggested, is not easy to reconcile with modern complex ones where a plurality of contrasting cultures may coexist. Indeed, serious doubts have been expressed about the usefulness of regarding *any* culture as a system, a relatively integrated totality; there is, too, the associated danger of reifying such concepts as 'culture' and 'society', treating them as if they were real entities. And the attempt to explain any social activities – such as the production of music – in terms of the general characteristics of society entails a further set of difficulties concerning the nature of human action. (Martin 1995:79–80)

Martin is certainly correct about the levels of difficulty entailed. For example, how are we to conceive of the temporal relationship between music and *Zeitgeist*? Is music merely a passive receptacle of social spirit? Or may it take the lead in the formation of social – that is, non-musical – constructions? Or are both music and 'the social' generated by some (mysterious and perhaps mythological) generative force? It is important to address these questions of *process*, to try to specify how the social comes to be inscribed in the musical, if one is to spell out an account of how structural affinities or homologues between music and social formations might arise and change over time. At best these issues are usually ignored; at worst, they are fudged through some version of what Donna Haraway (1991) calls 'the God trick', by which she means that the analyst poses as if in possession of an omniscient vantage point from which to know the social world (see also Hetherington 1998:11). And, as with early models within the social study of science, the music-is-parallel-to-society approach is best suited to static analytical frames – to the analysis of

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particular composers or works – and to the description of shifts in musical styles (from polyphony to homophony, for example). It is less equipped to address the subtler matter of music stylistic change, moment-to-moment, year-to-year, and within specifically circumscribed social worlds. Yet without a descriptively informed theory of the music–society nexus, the sociology of music, however grand its ambitions, is in peril of being marooned, as the poet Ed Dorn once so eloquently expressed it, in 'that great Zero/Resting eternally between parallels' (1978:73). The French sociologist Antoine Hennion makes this point even more tersely: 'it must be strictly forbidden to create links when this is not done by an identifiable intermediary' (1995:248). Hennion's point is eminently reasonable: while music may be, seems to be, or is, interlinked to 'social' matters – patterns of cognition, styles of action, ideologies, institutional arrangements – these should not be presumed. Rather, their mechanisms of operation need to be demonstrated. If this demonstration cannot be achieved, then analysis may blend into academic fantasy and the music–society nexus rendered 'visionary' rather than 'visible'. Indeed, a grounded theory of the music–society nexus allows conventional distinctions between musical and social materials to be dissolved; in their place, musical and social matters are understood to be reflexively linked and co-produced. This matter is dealt with further in chapter 2.

#### **Music and society – the 'little' tradition**

In contrast to Adorno and the problems associated with his 'grand' approach, the production of culture or art worlds perspective established a secure empirical footing through its focus on artistic production within art worlds (Becker), realms (Peterson) or 'meso' structures (Gilmore 1987; Clarke 1990). Poised between large-scale notions such as social structure or ideology and individual art producers, the approach made a virtue of following 'links' as they were forged at the ground level of action. As Becker put it in his 1989 'Letter to Charles Seeger':

Sociologists working in this [the Art Worlds] mode aren't much interested in 'decoding' art works, in finding the work's secret meanings as reflections of society. They prefer to see those works as the result of what a lot of people have done jointly. (1989a:282; see also Becker 1989b)

In emphasizing local social contexts of arts production, the sociologists to whom Becker alludes were reacting against long-distance relationships with their research material. Their perspectives helped to specify many of the ways that art works were shaped by social organizations, interests, conventions and capacities available within their realms of production.

The art worlds approach thus showed its greatest potential when it addressed the question of how society got into art in much the same way that studies of the laboratory have illuminated scientific knowledge as a human product (Barnes and Shapin 1979; Latour and Woolgar 1986 [1979]; Knorr-Cetina 1981; Lynch 1982). Bringing the sociology of music closer to musicology's traditional interest in historical detail and to the then-burgeoning interest, within music scholarship, of 'context studies' was thus one of the production of culture perspective's greatest strengths.

But the perspective suited some questions better than others. Its weakness lay in its appellation, 'production of culture', where the realm of the aesthetic was implicitly treated as an object of explanation but not as an active and dynamic material in social life. Paradoxically, then, the journey into context was also a journey away from a concern with the social *presence* of aesthetic materials, a journey away from the original concerns of Adorno and others who focused on the ways in which music was active in – and not merely determined by – social life. More recently, the sociology of the arts has begun to return to this concern (cf. Bowler 1994; DeNora 1995a; Hennion and Grenier 1998; Witkin 1995; Born 1995; Frith 1990a; Tota 1997a). As Shepherd and Wicke have remarked, 'a viable understanding of culture requires an understanding of its articulation through music just as much as a viable understanding of music requires an understanding of its place in culture' (1997:34).

The challenge, in making this return, lay in how to articulate the concern with music as an active ingredient without reverting to the mythological realm of the 'great Zero', to show, symmetrically, how music articulates social life and social life articulates music. As Simon Frith has put it (1987:137), 'the question we should be asking is not what does popular music reveal about "the people" but how does it construct them'. It is here that the originally British tradition of cultural studies, ethnographically conceived, can be seen to provide excellent tools for the job.

Within the classic studies of young people and their intimate involvement with music, in books such as Paul Willis's *Profane Culture* (1978), and Frith's early monographs, *Sound Effects* (1981) and *The Sociology of Rock* (1978), music's social presence was illuminated. Rereading these works, we can see music providing a resource in and through which agency and identity are produced. Indeed, these studies can be seen to be compatible with Adorno's focus on music's link to social being. But this time, the music–social structure nexus was specified in a manner amenable to observation. Music's structuring properties were understood as actualized in and through the practices of musical use, through the ways

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music was used and referred to by actors during their ongoing attempts to produce their social situations and themselves *as selves*.

For example, in his report on the culture of the 'bikeboys', Willis noted that the boys' preferred songs were fast-paced and characterized by a strong beat, a pulsating rhythm. Willis resorted to the concept of homology or 'resonance' to explain the relation of this music to bikeboy culture, but his study effectively evaded the 'great Zero' of parallelism by showing the reader how not *he*, Willis, but the boys *themselves* established this connection between music and social life. In *Profane Culture*, structural similarities between music and social behaviour – in this case small group culture – were forged through the cultural practices and lay classifications of the group members – the boys – themselves. They were never analysts' constructs. As Willis put it, 'objects, artifacts and institutions do not, as it were, have a single valency. It is the act of social engagement with a cultural item which activates and brings out particular meanings' (1978:193). The boys, as Willis describes them, are active interpreters whose group values were, 'almost literally seen in the qualities of their preferred music' (1978:63). The focus is directed at the question of how particular actors make connections or, as Stuart Hall later put it, 'articulations' (1980; 1986) between music and social formations. Here, then, at least for working purposes, is an interactionist and grounded 'worlds' version of Adorno's original vision. The subsequent history of the development of this perspective is, arguably, one of sociology's greatest contributions to the understanding of culture, in so far as it has provided concepts and descriptions of how aesthetic materials come to have social 'valency' in and through their circumstances of use.

The observation that agents attach connotations to things and orient to things on the basis of perceived meanings is a basic tenet of interpretivist sociology. But its implications for theorizing the nexus between aesthetic materials and society were profound. It signalled a shift in focus from aesthetic objects and their content (static) to the cultural practices in and through which aesthetic materials were appropriated and used (dynamic) to produce social life.

In the two decades that have followed the publication of *Profane Culture*, the field of audience and reception studies has advanced considerably. But the early interactionist promise of these classic works is too-often muted in favour of a preoccupation with 'what' people think about particular cultural works. The great contribution of Willis, Frith and Hall was their focus not on what can be 'said' about cultural forms, but on what the appropriation of cultural materials achieves *in action*, what culture 'does' for its consumers within the contexts of their lives. Thus, one of the most striking (and usually underplayed) aspects of *Profane*

*Culture* is its conception of music as an active ingredient of social formation. The bikeboys' preferred music did not leave its recipients 'just sit[ting] there moping all night' (1978:69). It invited, perhaps incited, movement. As one of the boys put it, 'if you hear a fast record you've got to get up and do something, I think. If you can't dance any more, or if the dance is over, you've just got to go for a burn-up [motorcycle ride]' (1978:73). Willis's work was pioneering in its demonstration of how music does much more than 'depict' or embody values. It portrayed music as active and dynamic, as constitutive not merely of values but of trajectories and styles of conduct in real time. It reminded us of how we do things to music and we do things with music – dance and ride in the case of the bikeboys, but, beyond this, work, eat, fall asleep, dance, romance, daydream, exercise, celebrate, protest, worship, mediate and procreate with music playing. As one of Willis's informants put it, 'you can hear the beat in your head, don't you . . . you go with the beat, don't you?' (1978:72). As it is used, both as it plays in real time and as it is replayed in memory, music also serves to organize its users.

If we take them at their word, the bikeboys tell us that they enter *into* the music and 'go with it'. Music takes them from one state (sitting around) to another (dancing as the music plays) to another (riding as the music plays in memory). In this sense, music is a cultural vehicle, one that can be ridden like a bike or boarded like a train. This description is metaphorical (and the boys' metaphors of 'going' and physical transformation are themselves cultural resources for holding on to a mode of being and a set of procedural commitments – in this case, to movement) but it is worth noting that one of the most common metaphors for musical experience in post-nineteenth-century Western culture is the metaphor of 'transport', in the sense of being carried from one (emotional) place to another (and indeed, at times, being 'carried away'). Viewed in this way, music can be conceived of as a kind of aesthetic technology, an instrument of social ordering. As Sarah Cohen suggests, 'focus upon people and their musical practices and processes rather than upon structures, texts or products illuminates the ways in which music is used and the important role that it plays in everyday life and in society generally' (1993:127). And, as Georgina Born puts it in her ethnography of IRCAM, it is necessary to focus on 'the actual uses of technologies [she could just as well have said "musics"]', which are often depicted in idealized, unproblematic, and normative ways' (1995:15). In common with all instruments and technological devices, music needs to be understood in terms of its (non-verbal) capacities for enabling and constraining its user(s). How, then, can this idea be developed and how can music's structuring powers be illuminated at the level of social experience?

### Getting into the music

I begin with a simple, highly mundane and apparently trivial case. A few years ago, when it was still a novelty to use a modem to access email from home, I was writing a book review of Susan McClary's *Feminine Endings* (see chapter 2, below). Normally, I would dial up the mainframe computer at the end of a work session, and there would be a short delay before the connection to the terminal server was established. Though the delay is only a few seconds, I tended to experience the wait as taking a long time, probably because of my eagerness to read my mail and my up-until-then rapid typing (and the expectation that when you press a key you get a response). When initially instructed on how to log on, I had been told to press the 'enter' key once or twice as a kind of prompt, and so, for a number of months when logging on, I pressed the key, somewhat impatiently, as fast as I could. Then one day, after I had been reading McClary's essay about Georges Bizet's opera, *Carmen*, I found myself pressing the enter key to the Habanera's opening rhythm, while simultaneously replaying the music in my head (see figure 1); and even before *Carmen* had begun to sing the words, 'L'amour est un oiseau rebelle', I was on the mainframe, impressed by the way time had flown. Somehow, this particular use of the Habanera became a habit. For some months after, as I logged on to the computer, I thought of the music and tapped the enter key to the opening rhythm, each time feeling, as I reached my email, slight regret that I had to 'interrupt' the aria to read my mail.

This simple example helps to introduce just a few of the ways in which music can 'get into action', so as to organize subjects in real time. The first way music does this concerns the body. My body, in this example (my index finger anyway), visibly slowed. Not only was the number of times I tapped the 'enter' key reduced, the action of my finger was realigned, or musically entrained with the Habanera's rhythm. In direct contrast to the case of the bikeboys, whose music speeded them up ('you've got to get up and do something'), here, music slowed down embodied action by enlisting the body into rhythm. But the Habanera's effects extended beyond bodily movement. The introduction of music changed the way I experienced a five-second interval. It redefined that temporal situation, translated it from 'long time' into 'short time'. The music did not simply fill in the time of waiting; it reconstructed the ongoing aim of my action such that the very thing I had been awaiting so eagerly (access to my email) was redefined in the real-time situation, as something that was interrupting the pleasure of the music. Defined in relation to the interrupted musical phrase, the email was then re-experienced as arriving 'too soon'. Here

Figure 1. Georges Bizet, *Carmen*, ‘Habanera’

## The 'art' of feeling secure – aesthetics of risk assessment

A transatlantic flight epitomizes a peculiarly modern requirement, namely the need to place one's trust in technological systems. The prospect of putting a few hundred strangers together in a hermetically sealed, crowded and, for at least some, potentially frightening, space is, of necessity, a prospect that confronts the problem of social order. Aware of this, airlines attempt to mould their consumers, to form them into 'ideal' users, into individuals who exhibit 'preferred' forms of passenger behaviour. Understandably, the airlines want no terrorists; they want

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passengers to remain mostly seated; they want passengers to obey requests from crew and to appear calm. Accordingly, carriers deploy a range of socio-technical devices to discipline passengers – security checks, passports, metal detectors, x-ray machines, overhead lighted signs and instructions from the flight crew, for example. Some of these devices are quite primitive – physical barriers, for example, of varying strength. No one is allowed through security without a passport and ticket, or with a weapon if it is detected in carry-on luggage. More subtly, passengers may be less likely to try to get up from their seats when a meal cart is blocking the aisle or the remains of a meal occupy a tray-table. Other disciplining devices appeal to passengers as 'rational actors', willing and able to participate in a rule-governed basis for social order and placing their trust in the superior knowledge claims of system professionals. When the captain announces the possibility of forthcoming turbulence, for example, and asks passengers to return to their seats, it is expected that everyone – even those who had wished to go to the lavatory – will obey, on the assumption that the airline and the flight crew know what is best.

Trust in the face of contingency is a key component of any expert system, and, as Anthony Giddens has observed, such trust 'is inevitably in part an article of "faith"' (1990:29). The literature on risk and risk cultures has documented how faith, as the foundation of trust in expert systems, is constituted from a 'pragmatic element' – for example, 'the experience that such systems generally work as they are supposed to do' (1990:29), and from the manner in which expert systems are embedded within external regulatory systems, and statistical representations of 'safety'.

These literatures excel when they address the construction of faith in expert systems from the point of view of *general* risk perception – the safety of air travel as a general concept, for example – as spoken about in the subjunctive (for instance, 'would you say that air travel is safe?'). But they are on weaker ground when they are called upon to account for the construction of trust in particular experiences of travel ('how do you feel about *this* flight?'). To ask about how individuals – atomized as passengers in seats – come to apply their generally held precepts about safety and security to the here-and-now of being on an aircraft is to ask about how social order and its attendant beliefs, habits and authority structures get instantiated in real-time circumstances. At the same time, this is a question about how modes of agency are constructed in and through a temporal dimension, across time and space.

What, then, does it take to inculcate trust in a local sense, to instantiate faith? What are the materials passengers use to make an interpretive connection between the typically 'safe' features of 'most flights' and 'this'