Music in Everyday Life

The power of music to influence mood and create scenes, routines and occasions is widely recognized and this is reflected in a strand of social theory from Plato to Adorno that portrays music as an influence on character, social structure and action. There have, however, been few attempts to specify this power empirically and to provide theoretically grounded accounts of music's structuring properties in everyday experience. *Music in Everyday Life* uses a series of ethnographic studies – an aerobics class, karaoke evenings, music therapy sessions and the use of background music in the retail sector – as well as in-depth interviews to show how music is a constitutive feature of human agency. Drawing together concepts from psychology, sociology and socio-linguistics, it develops a theory of music's active role in the construction of personal and social life and highlights the aesthetic dimension of social order and organization in late modern societies.

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To my parents

John DeNora and Shirley Wood Smith DeNora

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Preface and acknowledgements

On a drizzly Saturday morning in July 1998, I was sheltering under a tree in a North London market, conducting a series of impromptu interviews with women on the topic of 'music in their lives'. A contact had agreed to let me attach myself to her record stall and to vouch for me if questions arose. During a lull, the market manager wandered over to ask what I was doing. He told me he was originally from Nigeria, where, he said with emphasis, they 'really knew' how to use music. The situation was different in the United Kingdom, he said, where people did not seem to be aware of music's powers, and did not respect its social and physiological force. As he saw it, Europeans merely *listened* to music, whereas in Africa people *made* music as an integral element of social life. His mother, for example, sang certain songs as a regular part of her tasks and chores, even culinary operations, and she made use of different rhythms for different things. In Nigeria, he concluded, people had a richer and more overt understanding of music's powers, and a knowledge of how to harness those powers was considered to be an important part of common sense. By contrast, in the cold and over-cognitive climate of pre-millennium Britain, people were considerably less reflexive about music as a 'force' in social life.

For me, this encounter was deeply significant. It seemed to encapsulate so many of the issues I had been thinking about and the themes that undergird this book. It is certainly true that music's social effects have been underestimated in Western societies, despite the long-standing tradition from Plato to the Parents' Music Resource Centre devoted to just that theme, and despite the plethora of music's uses in daily life. Within modern societies, music's powers are – albeit strongly 'felt' – typically invisible and difficult to specify empirically. I believe, as I shall argue throughout this book, that this invisibility derives from a far more general neglect of the aesthetic dimension of human agency. This neglect is as common in the social sciences (with its cognitivist bias) as in the arts and humanities (with their emphases on text-objects).

But even if its official profile is not high, music's unofficial recognition

as a powerful medium is strong. Over the past two years, nearly everyone I have spoken with about my research has had something to say on the subject of music's powers in their own lives, even when they were sometimes bemused by my interest in such picayune matters as whether or not people listen to music while washing the dishes. Their comments, taken as a whole, point to music as a dynamic material, a medium for making, sustaining and changing social worlds and social activities. Perhaps socio-musical scholarship's failure to recognize music's powers is due more to the use of inappropriate models for conceptualizing the nature of those powers – too often, music is thought of as a stimulus capable of working independently of its circumstances of production, distribution and consumption.

In this book I take a different tack. I suggest that it is probably impossible to speak of music's 'powers' abstracted from their contexts of use, though, within certain settings and in relation to particular types of actors, music's effects on action may be anticipated to varying degrees. Indeed, thinking about the nature of musical power can help to enrich the ways we think about other types of 'human–non-human' relations and the role played by other kinds of objects and materials within social life.

The question of *how* music works remains opaque. Perhaps because it is rarely pursued from the 'ground level' of social action, too much writing within the sociology of music – and cultural studies more widely – is abstract and ephemeral; there are very few close studies of how music is used and works as an ordering material in social life. In the course of conducting the research detailed in this book, I was struck repeatedly by just how much of what I observed in relation to music's powers could simply not have been imagined in advance. It is ironic that, nearly without exception, discussions of music's affect have had little association with interactionist sociology's abiding commitment to the fine-grained, exquisitely practical detail of everyday life, and its focus on lived experience and lay knowledge. A focus on music 'in action', as a dynamic material of structuration, has yet to be developed. Within the social sciences, as I discuss in the following chapters, it has been the psychologists who have led the way to an environmental approach for socio-musical studies. Within sociology, perhaps only Antoine Hennion's studies of amateur musical practices (through in-depth interviews) come close.

In short, we have very little sense of how music features within social process and next to no data on how real people actually press music into action in particular social spaces and temporal settings. These are large issues, but are probably best advanced through attention to the so-called 'small' details illuminated by ethnographic and ethnohistorical research. Accordingly, the arguments developed in this book draw upon a series of

ethnographic investigations of music in daily life. This work included in-depth interviews with women of different age groups in metropolitan areas and small towns in the United States and United Kingdom, and four ethnographies of music 'in action' within specific social settings. (These included participant observation in aerobic exercise classes, karaoke evenings and music therapy sessions, unobtrusive observation of music in the retail sector and interviews with personnel in all these settings.)

Referring to these studies, the first aim of this book is to document some of the many uses to which music is and can be put, and to describe a range of strategies through which music is mobilized as a resource for producing the scenes, routines, assumptions and occasions that constitute 'social life'. Building upon these tasks, the second aim is to relocate music – as a type of aesthetic material – in relation to sociology's project, to bring it closer to the discipline's core concerns. Chapter 1 highlights music's active role in social life and proposes a way of drawing together perspectives from the American production of culture tradition, British cultural studies and sub-cultural theory, and the so-called 'grand' approach to socio-musical studies as exemplified by Adorno. Developing the grounded perspective outlined in chapter 1, the second chapter outlines an interactionist conception of musical affect that moves beyond conundrums concerning whether music's affect is 'immanent' or 'attributed'. Chapter 3 begins to put this perspective into practice by examining music's role in relation to the construction of the self, centring on music's role as a technology of identity, emotion and memory. Chapter 4 considers the reflexive relationship between music and embodiment and develops an interdisciplinary perspective for investigating many of the ways in which the body – i.e., its physiological, micro-behavioural and motivational processes – may be understood to be 'musically composed'. Chapter 5 considers the role played by music within social scenes and situations, and describes how music may be used and inadvertently serve to draw otherwise disparate individuals into temporary (albeit often recurrent) configurations of social order – situations, scenes and institutional relations. Finally, chapter 6 weaves together these different strands and argues that socio-musical studies deserve far greater prominence within the social sciences, where they may be of considerable assistance in articulating a theory of agency and its relation to culture. In the twenty-first century, at a time when aesthetic forms of ordering are increasingly prominent, and as organizations are increasingly concerned with producing agents as well as products, the aesthetic bases of social life are – or at least should be – relocated at the heart of sociology's paradigm.

Doing ethnographic research is always dependent upon the good will and help of others. I would therefore like to begin by thanking the fifty-two women who were kind enough to let me interview them in the United States and United Kingdom. I have promised them anonymity and have changed identifying details. But I hope none the less that they will recognize themselves in the discussions and transcripts and I hope I have been as true as I could be to the spirit of what they told me when we met.

I am also deeply grateful to the retail managers and staff (who must remain anonymous) who allowed their stores to be used as a setting for research and to the instructors and students in the various aerobics classes studied (in particular to Kate Burnison) for the generous help they gave. Creative music therapist Hazel Bailey kindly took time out from her busy schedule to give advice and talk about her work with mental-health and learning-disabled clients and Helen Tyler of the Nordoff Robbins Music Therapy Centre in London graciously offered advice and the use of the Centre's library. Near the end of the project, conversations with staff nurse Helen Kirby of the Derriford Neonatal Intensive Care Unit got me thinking about music's role in neonatology and I have taken inspiration from her ongoing practical work in that area. Thanks are due as well to 'Karaoke Bob', Exeter's well-known karaoke M.C., who recounted a range of practical observations based on his long experience in the karaoke world.

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