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Music, Culture, and Society: A Reader (review)

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# BOOK REVIEW

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Derek B. Scott, ed., *Music, Culture, and Society:*

*A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

In this compilation of just over three-dozen essays and extracts, Derek B. Scott proposes to explore “musical meaning and the extent to which it is informed by cultural experience and socially-derived knowledge.”<sup>1</sup> In the reader are sections on “Music and Language,” “Music and the Body: Gender, Sexuality, and Ethnicity,” “Music and Class,” “Music and Criticism,” and “Music Production and Consumption,” fleshed out with selections by such well-known musicologists and theorists as Eero Tarasti, John Blacking, Lucy Green, and Michel Foucault. Furthermore, included within each section is an introduction contextualizing the individual pieces, as well as a complete list a references.

The first section, “Music and Language,” addresses the applications of literary criticism to music as a type of language. Two extracts, one by musicologist Harold Powers and another by Leonard Bernstein, detail the various uses of the metaphor as tools in linking music and language. In his piece, Powers recounts the historical origins and development of three such uses: that of making a semantic (affective) connection, phonological (structural) connection, and linguistic connection (connection in meaning). Bernstein, building upon these distinctions, demonstrates their usefulness in answering the aesthetic question of how music “means.”

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A third extract by Patricia Tunstall regarding “musical structuralism” presents the dangers of grafting literary criticism into music criticism without alteration, alluding to many uses of structuralism as examples of such uninformed applications. A final highlight of the section is an excerpt from Finnish musicologist Eero Tarasti’s book *Myth and Music* in which he builds upon the work of structuralist Lévi-Strauss and claims that “musical structures . . . are detached from meanings,”<sup>2</sup> arguing that it is only through culture that the composer and listener approach the musical work in a meaningful way.

The second section, “Music and the Body: Gender, Sexuality, and Ethnicity,” is composed of nine extracts serving as examples of gendered, queer, and multicultural criticism in music. Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, as well as Jenny Taylor and Dave Laing, argue over the role of rock music from different feminist viewpoints. The former pair postulate that rock has historically served as an expression of male sexuality, whereas the latter argue that the music reflects different representations of sexuality in society. Representing scholars of queer theory, lesbian critic Elizabeth Wood introduces the idea of the “sapphonic voice” in an attempt to explain the attractiveness of the castrato voice and other voices that “refuse standard categories.”<sup>3</sup> The high points of this section, however, are the pieces that address multicultural concerns. In an excerpt from his celebrated text *How Musical is Man?*, ethnomusicologist John Blacking proposes the definition of music as “humanly organized sound”<sup>4</sup> and explores its consequences. Another selection by David Hatch and Stephen Millward takes a narrower focus, addressing the problematic concept of “black music” and its authenticity while arguing convincingly for the need to study African-American music independently from socio-political concerns.

The following section, “Music and Class” introduces concepts of interpellation and hegemony, but finds its strength in two extracts arguing over the method by which music addresses itself to a class structure. In an excerpt from his *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, Theodor Adorno argues that “music has something to do with classes in so far as it reflects the class relationship *in toto*,”<sup>5</sup> thus rejecting the common belief that a group’s musical preference is informative into its class aspect. Inversely, Paul Willis argues in an excerpt on subculture and homology that music gains its meaning socially via “objective possibilities”<sup>6</sup> contained within its internal structure, which allow a particular genre of music to be identified with a particular social group.

In the fourth section, “Music and Criticism,” the book addresses post-structuralism in three extracts claiming to either explore or perform musical deconstruction (whether or not two of them do is questionable), but the primary concern of the section is the distinction between so-called “high art” and “popular music.” Three separate pieces approach the distinction using different criteria. The first by edu-

education scholar Graham Vulliamy rejects mass culture as such a criteria, presenting an argument that the popular association between mass culture and popular music (pun intended) is detrimental to a proper understanding of the issue. In contrast, Pierre Boulez, in a transcribed conversation with Michel Foucault, emphasizes the role of commercial production in defining popular music. On the other hand, musicologist Allan F. Moore avoids this avenue entirely, claiming that function determines genre and the argument over the merit of different musical genres is an ethical rather than a musical issue.

The fifth and final section of the book, “Music Production and Consumption,” introduces a number of concepts related to the link between music, its producers, and its consumers. In an article regarding the dissemination of music, Paddy Scannell recounts the evolution of the BBC music policy in its first two decades from the goal of a “democratization of music”<sup>7</sup> to one of validation by musicologists. Also included is an extract by philosopher Lydia Goehr, wherein she defines the concept of a “musical work” and demonstrates its far-ranging consequences within the music industry. The music industry is also foregrounded in two other extracts, one by Peter Wicke and the other by Peter Martin. In the former, Wicke argues that the music industry manipulates the desires of its consumers, and that the consumers have little effect upon the industry. Addressing the role of technological innovation in society, Martin builds upon this idea by noting that the ever-changing technology returns some power to the hands of the consumer.

It should become apparent through this brief summary that *Music, Culture, and Society* addresses a large number of concepts important to the study of meaning in music. However, despite its ambitious form—or perhaps because of it—the text at times falls short of providing the comprehensive survey of social and cultural approaches to music criticism that a reader might expect. Weaknesses related to the quality, coherence, depth, relevancy, and accessibility of the compilation arise from the selection of extracts and general form that Scott is limited to.

With respect to the first of these weaknesses, the quality of the book, it should be noted that “music, culture, and society” is a broad topic indeed. As a result, some of the selections seem to be included more for the issues they address than the quality of their content. Copyright issues certainly do not make the task of choosing selections any easier. Thus, space is taken by such extracts as Elizabeth Wood’s piece of queer scholarship, which makes a reading of a cultural phenomenon whose existence is questionable and fails to support it with anything more than limited anecdotal evidence. Nonetheless, the piece does stand as a representation of queer theory as applied to music. Likewise, an article by Dave Harker regarding the “industrial folksong”<sup>8</sup> is little more than a critique of an earlier 1967 essay written by Albert Lloyd, though it does address the nature of a working-class

folksong tradition. Other examples include Lawrence Kramer's writing "on deconstructive text-music relationships,"<sup>9</sup> which makes an appealing proposition but only marginally addresses deconstruction (and perhaps misrepresents it), and the selection regarding dance by Richard Leppert that takes as its focus the country dance of eighteenth-century England.

The scope of the book also leads to a problem in coherence: Scott finds himself writing introductions to each individual section in an effort to draw lines of continuity among the pieces. He succeeds only partially, however, and the reader of his text is left with a fragmented impression of the relationship between music, culture, and society that Scott tries to foster.

A third weakness of the text is its lack of depth. The book contains thirty-seven selections in little more than two hundred pages, excluding references and index, and as a result there is not much room to develop any single idea. Many of the book's concepts are only given an introduction, as there is little room left for evidence or defense to be presented. Gino Stefani's model of musical competence, for example, suffers because there is no space in which to include any practical applications of the model. Similarly, a selection from Lucy Green is cut off prematurely, directly after her thesis is stated and before any arguments for it can be made. Claims in this collection made by Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, Charles Ford, Elizabeth Wood, Theodor Adorno, and Steve Sweeney-Turner particularly become questionable purely as a result of insubstantial support.

Another major drawback to the text is the lack of relevancy of many of its selections. Though the book itself was not published until 2000, Scott admits in the Preface that he began the project in 1991. As a result, only ten out of thirty-seven selections are published within the past decade (none within the past five years), and ten more have their origins before 1980. For a book that presumes to deal with the dynamic relationship between music and society, as well as the evolving field of aesthetic criticism, this is a significant gap in time between the writers and today's audience. This temporal disjunction becomes apparent, for example, in the pair of feminist articles written on rock music in 1979. Since this time, rock has evolved significantly both musically and in respectability; the term "cock rock"<sup>10</sup> which the authors introduce seems almost comical for its lack of relevancy today.

Scott's heavy piling of structuralist and "pure" deconstructive works is also somewhat untimely. In his introduction, "Music, Culture, and Society: Changes in Perspective," he discusses significant growth in "the importance of sociological and cultural theory to music-historical studies . . . in recent years."<sup>11</sup> By "recent years," the introduction refers to the postmodern revolution in criticism that took place in the late 70s and early 80s, and *began* with structuralism. In his excitement for this approach to aesthetic criticism, he includes eight selections which

address themselves specifically to structuralism or the first moment of post-structuralism. Unfortunately, though no one will deny the large influence of post-structuralism on aesthetic criticism, it has been heavily diluted by other approaches and its basic principles serve largely as background for much scholarly work in the last decade. A number of the selections thus stand more as historical curios rather than reflections on current perceptions of music, culture, and society.

This emphasis on structuralism and post-structuralism leads to a fifth and final weakness to this collection: it presupposes some degree of knowledge in the area of aesthetic criticism, and is thus somewhat inaccessible to the reader seeking an introduction to the subject. Though the term “introduction” has been used to describe the depth of many of the essays, their subjects and lack of background information (many of the pieces are extracted *in medias res*) would speak against their use as such; perhaps “review” might be a better term. Post-structuralism, for example, though the explicit subject of many selections, is never once defined for the reader. While Scott seems remarkably cognizant of this problem and includes a brief explanatory note on theoretical models at the back of the book, there is simply no way to define structuralism or cultural sociology in a paragraph, and even the explanatory notes assume the reader has some notion of the history of aesthetic criticism. Indeed, in the introduction, Scott launches immediately into a summary of the various failures of Modernism, but never once does he try to define it outside of its various characteristics. Finally, the book as a whole fails to articulate why the reader should care about its various propositions, and thus presupposes an interest in the topic as well as a knowledge of it.

In conclusion, *Music, Society, and Culture* finds its greatest strength in the sheer number of concepts it manages to address, and, for the interested and knowledgeable reader, can provide a solid introduction to or survey of some issues in music criticism with which he or she is not already familiar. Its well-documented nature also allows it to serve as an excellent reference for those who are interested in seeking further information on the subjects presented. However, limitations of the book’s form and the dated nature of some of the selections restrict the quality and accessibility of the material, not to mention its relevancy to the present-day reader.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Derek B. Scott, ed., *Music, Culture, and Society: A Reader* (New York: oxford University Press), cover.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 46.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 85.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 97.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 121.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 135.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 193.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 122.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 173.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 65.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 1.