# THE SOCIOLOGY OF MUSIC LISTENING IN EVERYDAY LIFE

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## ABSTRACT

Music sociologists, ethnomusicologists and social psychologists of music have turned over the past decade to music listening in ordinary life settings. This work has illuminated music's functions across a range of social settings and has helped highlight the importance of music perception as it occurs outside of both the laboratory and the concert hall. This paper surveys recent work on the topic and highlight directions and sociologically derived methods for future research. While the techniques described are mainly qualitative, they are not presented at the exclusion of experimental or quantitative modes of inquiry which are also of value. In particular the paper will discuss music's role in relation to strategies of social 'control' (i.e., music dissemination practices that are linked to attempts to structure the conduct of others), self-management in daily life and music's role in helping to define social scenes. It will point to some implications for the study of music's social effects and describe new and on-going work in the area. The study of music listening in everyday life will be described in relation to sociological theories of action and emotion and to the 'cultural repertoires' perspective. Too much of sociological theory has ignored the non-cognitive aspects of social action. Thinking about music listening in everyday life helps to highlight action's aesthetic dimension. Music, it will be concluded, should not be ignored within social theories of structure and agency and thinking about music as a dynamic medium in social life (via grounded studies of everyday music listening practices) helps to advance a richer conception of the sources and structures of social action.

## 1. MUSIC FOR SOCIAL THEORY

In recent years, sociological and social psychological studies of music listening have considered music's role in everyday life settings (1) (2). This work has helped to highlight music listening and music activity more broadly (3).

From a sociological point of view this work highlights music's role as a structuring medium in relation to social phenomena such as identities, events, situations scenes, organizations and action trajectories. Music is in short a material with and against which conduct and social relations are constituted. It is a building material of social action.

As such, the study of musical practice in the context daily life is a highly useful topic for sociology more generally: it helps to clarify the interrelation of, as sociologists put it, agency and structure. Music, as a form of culture with particular properties, may be seen as an instrument for social ordering, more specifically, a medium that may be seen to structure the non-cognitive and aesthetic dimensions of the ordering process.

For example, within musical events, particular musical materials may be perceived, often with regularity by their beholders, as commensurate with a variety of 'other things'. These 'things' may be other works (how we come to recognise the 'style' of an era, composer, region, for example) but, more interesting for socio-musical analysis, they may be some extra-musical phenomenon, such as values, ideas, images, social relations, or styles of activity. So too, extra-musical phenomena may be configured in relation to music. The *sociological* significance of this last point is intensified when music's social 'content' is not merely hailed (as a representation of a reality or imagined reality) but is rather, acted upon, when music comes to serve in some way as an organising material for action, motivation, thought, imagination and so forth. It is here that we can begin to speak of music as it 'gets into' action. And it is here that socio-musical study can be extended beyond notions (derived from textual analysis) of music's symbolic character, its interpretations and perceived *meaning(s)*.

## 2. METHODOLOGIES

Within sociology, focus has been directed to the *experience* of music consumption from the point of view of respondent/ participants. For this reason, pre-formed questions or experimental designs (which are helpful for examining action outcomes, less so for meanings and motivations) have been avoided in favor of qualitative methods. Two methods in particular have been employed by sociologists. These are the in-depth, or 'ethnographic' interview (1) (4) and participant observation (1). Both methodologies aim to elicit members' or respondents' meanings and practices (rather than exploring these through the filter of researchers' pre-classifications or assumptions). Both explore process-linked questions (5). In relation to socio-music study, these questions concern 'how' music is used and deployed, often subconsciously, as opposed to 'what' it may inculcate.

In the author's recent work (6) the qualitative focus has been extended so as to map specific *musical events* - temporally and spatially bounded instances of user-engagement with music. There the focus has been directed to three key phases of musical engagement, times a, b anc c. These are: (a) before the event (the biographical and music-associational pre-conditions of a musical event; (b) during the event (the actual engagement with music in real time in terms of the specific actors, music, setting, local conditions, and the specific action of music-engagement [e.g., talking about, moving to music, remembering something in relation to music]) and (c) after the event, in terms of change effected between time two and three.

Following the scheme of the musical event, key questions may then be posed so as to elicit highly grounded understandings of music's presence as an active ingredient of social organization. By specifying the who-did-what-when-and-where of musical practice, it is possible to illuminate actual cases where music may be said to 'afford' social and social-psychological phenomena

Ð forms or styles of conduct, emotions, embodiment or organizationally congruent behavior (e.g., particular forms of consumption behavior).

As a case-in-point, and as described in *Music in Everyday Life* (1), the respondent, 'Lucy', crafted a situation that enabled music to affect her. On the morning of the interview, she felt 'stressed' and so sought to 'calm' herself by listening to Schubert (some of the *Impromptus*). Lucy did not choose to listen under *any* conditions but embedded this 'calming' music in the material cultural context of sitting, not on a stool or a typist's chair, for example, but in a rocking chair, 'nestled', as she put it, between the two speakers. Lucy crafted, in other words, a music event that *authorised* music's specific calming powers: she contributed to what the music was then able to afford. This affordance (calming music) in turn drew strength from previous associations these pieces hold for Lucy: the *Impromptus* were pieces that her father played after dinner, pieces she would hear wafting up the stairwell when she was tucked into bed for the night, pieces that she would listen to with her parents by the fire, again in the evening before bedtime. Lucy thus lodged her chosen music in a nurturing, domestic context, a context of listening that heightened the calming, nurturing, soothing qualities of this music - as she perceived them. These practices were, as described above, a way of fine-tuning the signal to which she then 'responded'. She began, at time a, feeling stressed, engaged with music at time b, and felt 'calmed' at time c Ð music was thus implicated in her emotional realignment.

A second example drawn from a music therapeutic context helps to elaborate these points. (The example draws on an interview with a music therapist. The interview involved viewing videos of therapy sessions which were presented to the researchers by the therapist and which were stopped and started or replayed as questions arose.) Describing an autistic client who was originally unable to interact in any modality, a music therapist tells how she set up a musical situation that enabled the learning and sharing of musical parameters for interaction:

> I ignore any rhythms he is doing when I am doing the hello song; I am in charge then. The middle section is I am following him mostly and then when it comes to the end I am taking control again and not listening to his, well I am listening but not responding to his [music], so I play the tune of his hello song this sounds a bit sort of a strange way of doing it but I play the tune of his hello song to signify that I have taken control again and then I play the goodbye song so you will hear that at the end.

Gradually, over time as this practice is repeated consistently from session to session, the client learns how to take account of the temporal parameters of a situation (a schedule and grammar for action), musically configured. In this way, and notably, in a way that elides verbal understanding, a form of interaction is established, musically configured. To put this another way, the client, in orienting to a musically configured set of temporal parameters, is responding to musical technology of ordering. Sounds that were associated with nothing at time a come, over repeated sessions, to be associated with (and structure) the scheduling of (musical) interaction. Something has, in other words, been accomplished with music.

A final example involves music that is mobilised as a backdrop for intimate activity (1). There, (female) interviewees described how some music (e.g., heavy metal) was viewed as inappropriate as the soundtrack to intimate and erotic conduct. Instead, and more highly valued for this purpose, were forms of music perceived by interviewees as 'relaxing' or 'romantic' or 'spiritual'. In the interviewees comments it is clear that types of conduct and types of social scenes are not only associated with, by enabled by, some types of music and Ð conversely Ð hindered by others. Music was, in short, an active ingredient in the local constitution of intimate scenes and activities and was viewed by respondents as having the power to affect the structure and content (and emotional experience) of those activities.

## 3. MUSIC AND 'CONTROL'

Within sociological studies, music has been highlighted as a 'technology' (1) of self-regulation and collective management. Studies of music's role in the self-modification of emotional and embodiment (1) (4) (7) have described how actors employ music, at times with deliberation, to craft their on-going emotional states and conduct styles, and have examined music as it is used across a range of social settings, therapeutic, domestic, and organizational.

In all of these cases, two concepts have been of paramount importance. The first, as described above, is affordance: what, within the confines of particular music events, can music be said or made to afford? The second concept is entrainment, broadly and rather loosely conceived as the mutual alignment of individual features (embodiment, emotion, conduct) with musical or musical-associative features (pace, social-behavioral connotations as perceived by music's recipient[s]).

Social psychologists of music have been concerned with the empirical documentation of sound and action, mainly through experimental and quasi-experimental methods of investigation. One of the most common 'spaces' to be explored in this context is the retail space, where music is deliberately deployed so as to influence purchase and browsing behavior (1). There, the concept of 'fit' (8) Ð between music and subsequent conduct - helps to highlight how actors attend to aesthetic cues and adjust themselves to what seems appropriate within the setting (e.g., aligning purchase behavior to in-store atmospherics). Product choice Ð and level of product chosen Ð may vary according to musical atmosphere as the consumer unconsciously interprets and adapts to the musical situation. Something similar happens in clothing stores when shoppers may orient to goods on offer in ways that can be said to be musically mediated and this may involve products examined, length of time spent in-store and, more subtly, the embodied stylistic patterns of browsing (1). In all of these examples, the non-conscious and non-cognitive dimension of orienting to and aligning conduct/subjectivity to music is of great significance. Music, if it is a technology of social control, is also an insidious technology, one that may elide rational awareness.

More recently, the focus on music-as-control has been directed to study of music and workplace. There music's role has been transformed from pre-industrial times when it served as a 'technology' for the self-pacing and self-regulation of work (think of weavers' songs or sea shanties), to, under modern relations of production, a technology for achieving, 'passive consent' (9) by regulating worker-subjectivity. Workplace music, thus understood, is a tool, part of a repertoire of social action on-site. And the meaning of work in modern societies is configured in relation to emotional and aesthetic factors, a point captured some time ago by the sociologist Arlie Hochschild's concept of emotional work (11).

Emotional work involves, as Hochchild puts it, a bodily cooperation with an image. It is typically a process of which the individual engaging in the 'work' is unaware. So, for example, Hochschild describes how flight attendants will engage in various forms of emotional work as a tacit part of their job, deploying organizationally sponsored manners of conduct (such as being very friendly and accommodating as part of their behavioral style). Hochschild's concept was initially employed to highlight the changing quality of labor in service economies. But the idea of emotional work also helps to elaborate the notion of 'fit' as described in social psychology of music Ð one may, in effect, fall into particular modes of being in relation to musical styles and ambience and thereby perform particular forms of social action and emotional work. One may 'co-operate' with music's behavioral implications, with the modalities of conduct that music may come to afford within musical events.

Just as actors may engage in organizationally/musically sponsored modes of conduct, so too they may seek to renegotiate or resist organizational ambience. The various organizations against piped music attest to this. On its website, for example, the British (and increasingly international) organization against piped music, Pipedown, decries:

> Cows, when being milked, are supposedly more productive if lulled by piped music; the same principle is used to stupefy us into mindlessness before parting us from our money, votes, wits (10)…

Organizational 'control' via music (or acoustical soundscape more generally) can of course be resisted. In exploring the nature of that resistance, it is possible to consider further what it means to speak of music as a medium of 'control', here understood as the provision of musical materials that provide resources for some types of action, feeling and thought. As described in the example from 'Lucy' above, actors may seek to modify their subjective orientations so as to escape pressures placed on them by such things as work or life contingencies. This issue is well-illustrated by Michael Bull's study of personal stereo use (4) where in-depth interview respondents describe how the personal stereo is a device with which manage (redefine, resist) the phenomenological aspects of space, time and occasion. By changing the music (via headphones and personal stereo), in other words, one is able to change the nature of the spatial and scenic terrain within which one must function Ð at least until one needs to interact with others and thus the headphones come off! Bull's respondents describe how, through programming their own aural environments they are able to construct narratives that help them find coherence in spaces that otherwise they would perceive as 'bereft of interest' (39). In this way, the use of the personal stereo permits, as Bull puts it, 'biographical traveling'.

## 4. AESTHETIC REPERTOIRES

These ideas, about music and 'control', are promising for further, and more overtly sociological, reflection and theorizing. One of the most promising lines of theorizing to be developed in cultural sociology in recent years has focused on the idea of 'cultural repertoires' (known as the CR perspective). There, focus is directed to how any social performance mobilizes (available) resources, both socially distributed and locally available (situated), such as action-strategies and action-repertoires.

To take a simple example, actors draw upon cultural-linguistic tools in speaking to different types of social representatives (e.g., how one might typically speak to children or occupational superiors). One may draw upon a gamut of strategies one has observed and, in various mediated ways, imitated (think of learning courtship practices). These strategies may be adapted and honed over time to the point that they become repertoires for the production of all types of action. In this sense, cultural repertoires can be understood as the means through which social structures are both expressed and renewed. The idea that it could be possible to speak of socio-musical repertoires Ð modes of action that are oriented and fashioned in relation to musical styles or materials Ð is one worth pursuing empirically. Further features of CR theory are useful for this purpose.

First, it has been suggested that the key task for cultural sociologists concerned with culture's (read music's) 'causal' properties is to identify the relations that may adhere to cultural practices, for example to search for core or *anchoring practices*, around which other domains of practice/discourse may revolve (12). Other cultural sociologists have suggested that it is possible to think about cultural repertoires in terms of two 'tiers' - macro or distal repertoires and proximate tool-kits' (13). The first category is then seen to shape the second, rather as, in Bourdieu's work (14), the *habitus* - an individual's horizon of expectations and the almost tacit dispositions governing the 'choice' of (read access to) particular tools or strategies - is the proximal version of, and shaped by, the more distal social space (social distribution) of cultural practices, tastes and habits that accumulate as cultural capital.

The CR perspective would, at least implicitly, call for a focus upon actors as they engage with and mobilize musical-cultural materials, as they move through particular cultural fields and so configure themselves as conscious agents. In principle, then, the concern with cultural (socio-musical) repertoires is one within which the concept of action - in particular of the structure, process and consequences of culture mobilization - is preserved.

Music is a topic that has been left mostly unexplored by cultural sociologists. And yet, a focus on how music may inform action and experience is especially useful. It shifts attention within cultural sociology away from a concern with culture-as-meaning, and culture-as-text (i.e., an object to be decoded and received - and thus a program of research reduced to semiotic readings

and/or reception studies). It shifts attention toward, instead, a program focused upon culture as a structuring medium of action and in particular, to music as providing a set of 'cues' for different cultural frames as they may be invoked within situations. A range of investigative questions follow from this perspective.

How, for example, might music serve as anchoring practice within a setting and under what conditions? When might music take priority over other features within a setting? How might music configure or structure forms of 'appropriate' action within a setting and how is it possible to describe this process? In what ways might it be possible to map types of conduct forms with the music's to which they seem fit? Beginning with ground level studies of musical events, and using a range of research methods that extend beyond those described above, it might be possible to develop a deeper understanding of how music possesses ordering properties in relation to the various activities, situations, settings and scenes that compose 'everyday life'.

# 5. CONCLUSION

Sociologists have long been concerned with how to conceptualize the relation between culture and agency. The classic philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, often spoke of music and its 'influence' on character and action. More recently, critical theorists of music, such as Adorno, described music in relation to social stability, in particular emphasising music's (in particular popular music's) ability to set up 'conditioned relfexes' in 'its victims' (15).

To speak of these questions is to speak of how culture 'gets into' action, how, in other words, action is oriented to and mobilizes what cultural materials may afford. Focusing on specifically bounded musical events, on the 'who, where, what and how' of musical appropriation in everyday life, permits empirical enquiry on this age-old set of issues. Music is much more than an aesthetic product to be 'interpreted' or 'enjoyed'. It is arguable a technology of doing, being and feeling in social life and should be further explored as such.

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