

# Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education

*the refereed scholarly journal of the*



Thomas A. Regelski, Editor  
Wayne Bowman, Associate Editor  
Darryl A. Coan, Publishing Editor

For contact information, please point your Web Browser to:

ACT Journal: <http://act.maydaygroup.org>

or

MayDay Site: <http://www.maydaygroup.org>

## **Electronic Article**

Cavicchi, D. (2002). From the Bottom Up

Thinking About Tia Denora's *Music in Everyday Life*. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. Vol. 1, #2 (December 2002).

**© Daniel Cavicchi, 2002 All rights reserved.**

The content of this article is the sole responsibility of the author. The ACT Journal and the MayDay Group are not liable for any legal actions which may arise involving the article's content, including but not limited to, copyright infringement.

---

## From the Bottom Up Thinking About Tia Denora's *Music in Everyday Life*

Daniel Cavicchi, Rhode Island School of Design

### I.

It has always struck me as slightly absurd to have to talk specifically about something called “music in everyday life.” After all, for me and for millions of other people in the Western world, music is experienced *only* in everyday life, *only* as a brief, fleeting part of life’s mundane moments: commuting to work, eating in a public restaurant, going shopping at the mall, playing with children, or watching television. Like many people, I live in a small house in the suburbs, far enough from the rich urban musical culture trumpeted every Sunday in the newspaper to make it seem otherworldly. My musical life stopped being about regularly playing in an orchestra, or going out to hear bands, a long time ago. Instead it means listening to the radio or the CD player when I get a chance; indiscriminate hearing of music on television, in public places, or while on hold on the telephone; and maybe fooling around a little bit, alone, on the guitar or trumpet for twenty minutes each weekend until my kids beg me to stop. Like many adults, I music when I can, within the constraints of the culture in which I live.

The great thing about DeNora’s book is that it takes seriously this sort of modern and mundane musical experience. Her opening quotation, from a Nigerian who claims that Westerners are unable to really understand the power of music (and which could also have been said by any number of ethnomusicologists), is a perfect way to set up the problem of studying the musical cultures of the industrialized world. While the music

disciplines (and many people outside of academia) retain a perception of musicality based on composition and performance, such activities simply aren't the norm any more in, say, the United States, where CD player sales overwhelmingly outnumber instrument sales. Most Americans don't *play* music, they *listen and dance* to music. And because the music disciplines are wedded to composition and performance, Americans are regularly seen by music scholars as embarrassingly unmusical. As one ethnomusicologist responded on the Society for Ethnomusicology discussion list a few years ago when I raised this subject: "It cannot be denied that actually performing music, playing an instrument or singing, opens up vast vistas of musical understanding...Does a childhood spent surrounded by musical wallpaper in a shopping centre really inform a person IN THE SAME WAY as actually learning an instrument as a child? Should we really try to compare that kind of musical experience with that of an Aboriginal child who may spend a significant part of his or her life surrounded by parents, grandparents, uncles, brothers, and other assorted kin, all frequently involved in musical performance for weeks at a time?"<sup>1</sup>

Denora does not dismiss people's experience of "musical wallpaper" outright but rather embraces it, probing it not for its worth but its *work* in people's lives. And in the end she argues compellingly that such "wallpaper" affords important potential for individuals to create meaning, shape community, and manage existence in the twenty-first century. None of what's revealed in the book would be particularly earth-shattering for non-academics; I don't think, given the theoretical language, that they would care to read it anyway. But for music scholars, the book lays out a number of provocative and

Cavicchi, D. (2002). From the Bottom Up: Thinking About Tia Denora's *Everyday Life*. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. Vol. 1, #2 (December 2002).  
[http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Cavicchi1\\_2.pdf](http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Cavicchi1_2.pdf)

detailed theories that challenge prevailing and persistent notions in the academy about what “music” is and how to think about its power.

## II.

For me, the strength of DeNora’s arguments lies in their development of what might be called a “reception theory” for music. Frankly, the music disciplines (musicology, ethnomusicology, folklore, popular music studies) are an embarrassment when it comes to addressing the intricacies of audience behavior and beliefs, and the accumulated theories of audience in music pale in comparison to the understandings developed over the past thirty years in other disciplines like literature, media, and film.<sup>2</sup> Reader-response theory, the history of the book, television effects research, fan ethnography, and spectatorship theory have revolutionized literary, media, and film criticism, opening them up to new insights and broadening their purpose and scope. Where are the reception theorists like Jonathan Culler, Robert Darnton, Cathy Davidson, Stanley Fish, Norman Holland, Wolfgang Iser, Janice Radway, and Jane Tompkins in music? One of the obstacles to thinking about audience in music remains the entrenchment of text-based analysis in traditional musicology, in which audience is secondary to structure or, as DeNora discusses, to “the critic.” Another obstacle has been the discipline’s institutional commitment to vocational training, in which the audience is secondary (metaphorically and literally) to the performer and the performance. DeNora’s ethnographic approach to investigating music, however, one that pragmatically tries to “shift from a concern with what music ‘means’ ...to a concern with what it ‘does’ as a

Cavicchi, D. (2002). From the Bottom Up: Thinking About Tia Denora’s *Everyday Life*. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. Vol. 1, #2 (December 2002).  
[http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Cavicchi1\\_2.pdf](http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Cavicchi1_2.pdf)

dynamic material of social existence” (49) avoids such obstacles. In everyday life, the role of “audience” does exist and it does matter.

The first thing DeNora does is problematize the conventional understanding of the role of audience in creating musical meaning. In particular, she portrays the reception of music not as an unpacking of a sound text but rather as a dialectical merging of the musical and non-musical meanings over time, a connecting of sound and the constantly changing ideologies, associations, circumstances, and situations, which themselves “constitute” the very perception of sound in the first place. As she puts it: “Non-musical materials, such as situations, biographical matters, patterns of attention, assumptions, are all implicated in the clarification of music’s semiotic force. Conversely, though, and simultaneously, music is used to clarify the very things that are used to clarify it” (45).

This argument revisits a phenomenological understanding of music reception that has been articulated in several different places over the last several decades.

Ethnomusicologist Steven Feld has argued that listening is an “entangling... of a dialectical object and a situated interlocutor,” involving all sorts of musical and

“extramusical” interpretive moves.<sup>3</sup> Music historians Peter J. Rabinowitz and Jay Reise likewise have argued for different sorts of “associations” (technical, attributive, synthetic)

that constitute the musical object through listening.<sup>4</sup> More recently, Swedish music scholar Ola Stockfelt identified “adequate modes of listening” for different encounters

with music that are based on conditions of “repertoire, situation, music, and strategy.”<sup>5</sup> I, too, have written about similar actions of interpretation among Bruce Springsteen fans.

Cavicchi, D. (2002). From the Bottom Up: Thinking About Tia Denora’s *Everyday Life*. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. Vol. 1, #2 (December 2002).  
[http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Cavicchi1\\_2.pdf](http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Cavicchi1_2.pdf)

Fans I interviewed often expressed wonder that Springsteen's latest song always addressed some circumstance they were confronting or idea they were formulating. In fact, many expressed confusion about whether their views of the world came from Springsteen's music or whether their views were what drew them to the music in the first place. After talking with them, it became clear that *both* were happening. Fans always had the feeling that Bruce was reading their minds because their minds were active elements in constructing and interpreting the music. And Springsteen's music always heightened their awareness of what was going on elsewhere in the general circumstances of their lives because the general circumstances of their lives were always framed and shaped by their listening. In fact, I argued that, for fans, listening was not simply contained in the process of hearing and interpreting a song, but in fact, happened continuously throughout the day, in both musical and non-musical moments. Fans were always "listening," always making and deepening the connection between their hearings and their lives.<sup>6</sup>

DeNora is right to argue that "there is nothing untowardly mysterious" about all this (43). However, given the entrenched reification of music and its attendant methods of formalism – not only in musicology but among non-academic music lovers – seeing music as an open "process" and not a closed "object" remains a radical idea. Despite

Christopher Small's decades-long attempt to redefine music as "musicking,"<sup>7</sup> and all the theories of listening already mentioned, people still buy music in pre-packaged plastic cases and then play "it" on their stereos and react to "it," something that effectively masks their own part in constituting that music and that constitution's place in broader

Cavicchi, D. (2002). From the Bottom Up: Thinking About Tia Denora's *Everyday Life*. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. Vol. 1, #2 (December 2002).  
[http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Cavicchi1\\_2.pdf](http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Cavicchi1_2.pdf)

social processes. And the idea that musical behavior is not simply a separate and ritualized encounter with a work at the concert hall or in front of the stereo but rather is more finely interwoven into the text of our lives, a means of shaping perception and participation generally, has significant ramifications for music's power.<sup>8</sup> Music is not necessarily the source of marked transcendent experience but a resource for the unmarked, regular, hard work of getting through each day.

DeNora demonstrates this work clearly in her discussions of how music may serve to shape and maintain the self and how it may regulate bodily processes. Much of what she argues about the self echoes what has been written elsewhere, most notably in popular music studies.<sup>9</sup> Her discussion about music and the body, however, offers a number of new insights. For years, ethnomusicologist Charlie Keil has been talking about the ways in which musicking is a fundamental part not only of human culture but also of human biology. However, he has argued that while everyone is hard-wired to naturally groove together through playing and dancing to music, many of us have buried that capacity through the oppressions, dislocations, and alienations of modern civilization.<sup>10</sup>

DeNora's borrowing of the theory of entrainment – the way in which people's bodies attempt to align their physical processes with recurring aspects in the environment – accepts the fundamental role of music in human biology, but she's far more positive about the capacity for modern, industrialized human beings to use musical experience for their own bodily needs. She un.masks not our bodies' *reactions* to a soundscape (which depend on conventional understandings of music as a structured text and the body as a

Cavicchi, D. (2002). From the Bottom Up: Thinking About Tia Denora's *Everyday Life*. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. Vol. 1, #2 (December 2002).  
[http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Cavicchi1\\_2.pdf](http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Cavicchi1_2.pdf)

static container of organs, etc.) but our *reflexive use* of the soundscape to maintain bodily states (which depends on looser, constructivist definition of both music and the body).

While DeNora's ethnographic evidence nicely supports her argument, I would love to delve deeper into how exactly different bodies are synchronized with different environments and to think about musical situations in which the body *can't* or *won't* be synchronized. In the case of aerobics, which DeNora explores at some length, music is deliberately sought and chosen for its capacity to influence and modify bodily state. But what about instances where such influence and modification are neither sought nor desired? What about shopping malls where the relentless background music induces a splitting headache? Or the city street, where random sound can seem like an assault? DeNora's melding of the body, sound, and the environment points well beyond sound that is musical; it is useful in thinking about human-sound interactions more generally. As I first read this chapter, I was reading elsewhere about activists in 1920s New York, who were fighting the effects of, and changing behaviors engendered by, the growing urban soundscape. While these activists didn't know it, it seems to me they were struggling with entrainment as a negative situation, as a *problem* where people were



constructing their bodies with an unhealthy sound environment.<sup>11</sup> How does that square with DeNora's case studies? Does sonic entrainment have negative power about which we should be concerned? Is its potential for abuse as noteworthy as its positive uses?

DeNora's use of the theory of entrainment reminds me of Robert Kubey's and Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi's use of chaos theory in their study of television viewers (that in turn is based on Csikszentmihalyi's theory of "flow"), which asserts that all sensory

Cavicchi, D. (2002). From the Bottom Up: Thinking About Tia Denora's *Everyday Life*. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. Vol. 1, #2 (December 2002). [http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Cavicchi1\\_2.pdf](http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Cavicchi1_2.pdf)

information that enters human consciousness has a potential to either create order (“negentropy”) or chaos (“entropy”), and that while we always tend always to seek order, our ‘strategies’ do not always work to our benefit (for example, in vegging out in front of the television rather than seeking more complex and challenging activities).<sup>12</sup> I think personally that Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi expect too much of hard-working people, but could the same thing happen with music? Might people become physically addicted to certain “undesirable” musical environments because of the feelings of harmony or pleasure the afford? DeNora shows that entrainment is useful in therapy with autistic children; are there circumstances where people may have to be de-entrained? What happens when those neonates have to give up their I.C.U. soundtracks? Such questions are important because they address one of DeNora’s main themes in the book, “agency.” Throughout, DeNora uses the term “affordance” to shape an understanding of how people use music to shape a sense of identity, control moods, or to “fit” into their surroundings—to, in her words, “aesthetize” themselves (153). To what extent can people control their aesthetization?

The area of musical endeavor most frequently criticized by scholars for its absence of agency or control (its passivity) is listening.<sup>13</sup> However, DeNora’s evidence suggests that listening is far from passive. In fact, to portray listening as an inherently passive state of affairs (in contrast to the inherent “activity” of music *making*) is nonsense, since one can easily play passively (practicing scales, doing unwanted studio work to pay the bills, plucking aimlessly while sitting on the porch on a hot day) and listen actively (vigorous dancing, concentrated listening at a concert hall, editing music

Cavicchi, D. (2002). From the Bottom Up: Thinking About Tia Denora’s *Everyday Life*. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. Vol. 1, #2 (December 2002).  
[http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Cavicchi1\\_2.pdf](http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Cavicchi1_2.pdf)

for film). Criticisms of listening's passivity often have less to do with perceived reality than with resistance to it. In mass culture critiques, passivity is meant to imply a loss of control of music production: where music used to be (and in some places remains) an organic, spontaneous part of human community, it is often now a carefully pre-packaged product to be marketed and sold. Listening, as the only behavior allowed music consumers – and an act that is artificially abstracted from its integral connection with playing and dancing – is seen as synonymous with this loss. But the label “passive” doesn't take listening at face value, as it is practiced and experienced. Instead, it subtly reduces listening to an abstract anti-category “not-playing” or “not-singing” – that has little connection with the attributes of the behavior itself and automatically taints its potential value.<sup>14</sup>



Some scholars, it seems to me, actually harbor a willful indifference toward the good that listening does for people in their daily lives, how it actually helps people to cope with the situations they face and the environments they encounter. However, on the whole, the denigration of listening is more the result of professional theories, (espoused in music departments, schools, and arts organizations) that no longer match the vernacular realities (in the bedrooms and rec-rooms of the western world) they are meant to address and shape; “musicology” and “music” have parted ways. Specifically, if musicologists and ethnomusicologists and music educators are judging contemporary listening by using a definition of musicality that favors performance, they are certainly bound to miss the very elements of listening – identity, the body, social relations – that might make it valuable. Only by accepting and valuing the given experiential realities of

Cavicchi, D. (2002). From the Bottom Up: Thinking About Tia Denora's *Everyday Life*. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. Vol. 1, #2 (December 2002).  
[http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Cavicchi1\\_2.pdf](http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Cavicchi1_2.pdf)

ordinary people – and not interpreting their experiences as “really” something else – can scholars see what listening “does.” I’m not sure that DeNora herself was all that comfortable with such an enterprise; her theoretical language indicates a proclivity for intellectual abstraction that would prohibit inhabiting the point of view of an average listener. But DeNora’s focus on conducting ethnographic interviews with actual people during the research process enabled her to see things she hadn’t considered. As she admits, “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” (x). In the end, DeNora’s look at music at the micro-level enables her to re-imagine what music might be about. That’s an important message for those interested in taking musicology in new directions.

### III.

One thing I always admired about ethnomusicology was that its mission was to understand music not solely as an inspirational “art” created by the talented and great – as promoted by musicology – but rather to see it as a common force among all human beings. It’s what attracted me to the discipline in the first place; while it was hard not to notice my some of my colleagues’ disdain for popular music, ethnomusicology enabled me to focus on the musical lives of ordinary people and gave me a method with which to enter and share their lives. In fact, I imagined ethnomusicology radically subverting musicology in the same way that social history radically subverted history in the 1960s: introducing new methods that looked at a topic from the bottom up rather than the top down (to use historian Stephan Thernstrom’s phrasing). That this book, written from the

sociological viewpoint, readily fills the epistemological gaps in the larger study of music means, for me, anyway, that ethnomusicology really has not lived up to its goals (or, at



least, has not adequately promoted its achievements).<sup>15</sup> DeNora's book is a reminder not only for sociology that "culture matters" but also for ethnomusicology that "culture is everywhere."

From whatever discipline or field one calls home, however, the underlying message is the same: the only way that the academic study of music can get out from under the bizarre array of antiquated disciplinary assumptions and territorial contradictions that have been tightly woven around its mission over the last century is to start over and get down to the "fine-grained, exquisitely practical detail of everyday life"(x). I would imagine that such an approach might be helpful for transforming not only the study of music at the research level, but also in the primary and secondary music classroom. I am not a music educator (nor am I a member of the May Day Group), so I do not know all the sorts of things that are being done these days to move the field ahead. But if my own experiences are any gauge, I would think it safe to say that the steadfast school music rituals of singing folk songs in unison, learning music notation, and playing an instrument in a marching band are quite removed from most students' musical lives, not only in terms of genre and style but also in terms of defining what "music" is supposed to be about. If outside of school a student's musical life mainly consists of trading MP3 files of obscure emo and grunge songs on his computer or dancing with friends at an all-ages club, then a music class where he studies how to play the clarinet is going to seem incredibly bizarre. Even attempts by teachers to incorporate more popular

Cavicchi, D. (2002). From the Bottom Up: Thinking About Tia Denora's *Everyday Life*. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. Vol. 1, #2 (December 2002).  
[http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Cavicchi1\\_2.pdf](http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Cavicchi1_2.pdf)

---

musics into the class risk coming off as a lame ploy. As one student I interviewed several years ago sarcastically put it: “We have music class, but the teacher’s a jerk. She’s doing this whole thing called ‘From Bach to Rock.’ *Yeah, right!*”

Thinking about music in everyday life resituates the typical relationship between students and the curriculum. Wouldn’t it be great if teachers could radically and directly address music *as it is practiced* in students’ daily lives? I’d love to see classes where students keep journals of their musical experiences during the day, examine their own feelings while hearing, think about identity, measure their bodily states, map their social interactions around music, and then compare assumptions and conclusions. I’d love to see students do case studies as DeNora has done here, or interview family members and friends as we did in the Music in Daily Life Project. I’d love to see classes spend three to four months creating a detailed ethnography of music in their hometown. This may already be happening, but if not, I would urge teachers to at least try to loosen their focus on genres and performance and introduce reflexive thinking about practices and behavior (in DeNora’s terms, letting go of what music “means” for what it “does”). With that small shift in emphasis, music class will no longer be known as only for the “talented” or “inclined” but as something for everyone; it will no longer dictate to students what music is supposed to be but rather ask them to explore what it might do for different people. The democratic participation and knowledge generated by this approach might be more lasting and effective in teaching students about the power of music than all a given school’s performance ensembles combined.

---

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Peter G. Toner, “Re: Americans’ Alleged Ignorance of Music,” SEM-List, July 24, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> The work of reception studies across the disciplines is voluminous. Janet Staiger nicely sums it up, as of 1990 or so, in *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). For a summary of contemporary debates, especially among media scholars, see James Hay, Lawrence Grossberg, and Ellen Wartella, eds., *The Audience and its Landscape* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Steven Feld, “Communication, Music, and Speech About Music” in Charles Keil and Steven Feld, *Music Grooves* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 77-95.

<sup>4</sup> Peter J. Rabinowitz and Jay Reise, “The Phonograph behind the Door: some Thoughts on Musical Literacy” in Sarah Lawall, ed., *Reading World Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994) 287-308.

<sup>5</sup> Ola Stockfelt, “Adequate Modes of Listening” in David Schwarz, Anahid Kassabian, and Lawrence Siegel, *Keeping Score: Music, Disciplinarity, Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997) 129-146. English translation by Anahid Kassabian and Leo G. Svendsen.

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 5, “Listening and Learning” in Daniel Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning Among Springsteen Fans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 108-133.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed discussion of the ways in which ritualized concert behavior serves as a periodic revitalization of other sorts of mundane musical behavior, see Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us*, 86-107.

<sup>9</sup> For examples, see Barry Shank, *Dissonant Identities: The Rock’n’Roll Scene in Austin, Texas* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994) and Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us*.

<sup>10</sup> See especially: Charles Keil, “Participatory Discrepancies and the Power of Music” in Charles Keil and Steven Feld, *Music Grooves* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 96-108.

<sup>11</sup> See Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002) for a more detailed discussion of this episode in listening history.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Kubey and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Television and the Quality of Life: How Viewing Shapes Everyday Experience* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> The latest example I came across was in Nicholas Tawa, *High-Minded and Low-Down: Music in the Lives of Americans, 1800-1861* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000) 297.

<sup>14</sup> See Joli Jensen, *Redeeming Modernity* (New York: Sage Publications, 1990) for further elaboration of this critique of mass culture criticism.

<sup>15</sup> DeNora's labeling the study of musical practices in modern societies as "ethnomethodological ethnomusicology" (155) struck me as especially dated. Before 1980, ethnomusicology's focus was certainly limited to non-Western musics in non-industrial cultures. But today the discipline has clearly changed, with many of its younger scholars regularly practicing urban ethnography and studying popular musics in Western culture, thinking in innovative ways about capitalistic and "modern" relationships of musical production and reception.