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Tackling the Seemingly Obvious – a Daunting Task Indeed An Essay Review of *Music in Everyday Life*

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Not only is music socially constructed by those who engage in performing or listening to it, music constructs the very “realities” in which the performing or listening take place. Music is thus a vital social agent in the lives of all who engage in it, whether as performers or as listeners.

This is the message I derived from Tia DeNora's latest book whose intended scope, as its title indicates, is as broad as people's involvement in music is varied. The message is not entirely new, of course: scholars in the fields of philosophy, cognition, cultural anthropology, ethno-musicology, and music education have articulated similar thoughts and theories. Part of what distinguishes DeNora's work from these other scholarly efforts is her claim to ground the ideas she advances in empirical-qualitative research. The theories she develops in this book are offered as outcomes of systematically gathered evidence about how people use and interact with music in their everyday lives. For this reason, at least some of the comments I make here will focus upon methodological issues.

In her second chapter, DeNora makes the important argument that a musicologist's or music analyst's description of a piece of music is inescapably grounded in one's relationship with the music: because “the moment of production is never automatically isomorphic with the moment(s) of consumption” (29) one may be

warranted in speaking of a piece's potential "affordances," but no more. It is appropriate for an analyst (DeNora is referring here to Susan McClary) to suggest possible connotations, then, but to attribute to such connotations objective or abstract referents like "the feminine" or "the masculine" amounts to an arbitrary kind of "I'm telling you it's there' form of analysis" (28). Such strategies are, in DeNora's words, "impossible to validate and impossible to refine"(29). They simply go beyond what a sociology of musical affect can rightly "presume to know" (31): what music causes, its semiotic force at the level of reception, action, or experience, lie outside what the analyst can stipulate. That is because "the work 'itself'," writes DeNora, "cannot be specified; it is anything, everything, nothing. The social identity of the work – like all social identities – emerges from its interaction and juxtaposition to others, people and things" (31). "Sociologists have shown how not even propositional social rules (of etiquette, for example) can be fully known and determining of social practice, since the very 'telling' of the rules is itself an interactive and world-making resource (31). The only way out of this dilemma is to talk to the people who interact with the music, and on levels of their own choosing. Thus, DeNora's choice of an interview-based, qualitative research protocol.

Given the myriad ways in which people anywhere interact with music in their everyday lives, interviews with fifty-two selected American and British women (age 18 to 77) about music's role in their daily activities constitute a somewhat limited data pool. The research therefore should be seen as a welcome beginning to more explorations to come: the scenarios forming the backdrop for the interviews (observations in music aerobic classes, conversations about times of relaxation, times of being alone, and times

of being with others) may be more typical of how women use and interact with music than of men. Later in the text she explains her choice of selecting only women, but I was not fully convinced of her choice since, as she states elsewhere, "...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" (x). Given the breadth of the book's title, one wonders whether it would not have served her purpose better if she had opted either for a randomly selected sample or at least a carefully selected population consisting of a somewhat equal number of men and women from different "walks of life."

The questions DeNora asked in the interviews and the way she probed further into the respondents' initial answers shows skill in speaking a language free from academic jargon, thereby leading to useful and informative data. In this regard, her approach to field research may serve as a model for music education researchers interested in getting non-musicians to speak about music. For example:

- Can you describe the situation of listening in the front room, like maybe the last time you listened to music in the front room? Can you just tell me [fairly detailed], just what made you go in there to listen, like was it a choice or...? (16)
- Is there some music that is romantic or some music that isn't romantic, or can any music be romantic? (43)
- What music is likely to come on when your clock radio comes on? (50)
- If you were going out what kind of thing would you listen to? Would it be the radio? (54)
- [A]re there sounds apart from music that you particularly like? (54)
- Have you ever tried to set a mood in any way, where you may have put things on in the background to get things livened up, or have some effect, in other words? (54)
- You mentioned things with words, are there any other styles of music that you wouldn't listen to when you were working? (59)

- If you were going to have people around, I'm just going to jump ahead a bit, for a meal or a drink or something, would you put music on for that? (117)
- Do you ever use any other kind of music to set the mood in any circumstances? (117)
- What kind of CD would you be wanting to listen to at that stage of the day? (117)
- Could you give me some examples of what from [this] collection you would choose? (117)
- Can you, I'm going to press, can you be as specific as possible, what kind of music and what kind of female singers? (117)
- How would you describe what is the mood that it evokes if you are putting them on? (117)
- Actually, one of the questions I ask of everybody is, do you ever like to have music on in the background as a prelude to, you know, 'romance'? (117)

Of course, any time we as researchers use the generic term 'music' to designate different styles, types or instances, the responses we get from different individuals may refer to different things, reflecting significantly divergent meanings. Thus, by "music" one person may understand or intend Mozart-like sounds while another may have in mind the sounds of a certain rock style or group. Or, when a student proclaims to "love music," chances are that it is not the same music the teacher may "love." As long as these differences in meaning are acknowledged and understood, research on listeners' physical-affective musical realms is of value. If such differences in meaning are ignored, the research findings are likely to yield relatively few new insights. Given the type of probing in which DeNora engaged, it is evident that she was very sensitive to this problem in her own research and took measures to account for it in the interpretation of her data.

The choice to omit these and other methodological details from her book may have been motivated by a concern for readability or accessibility to the non-researcher: a reasonable concern. However, had she chosen to reference them in an endnote or in an

appendix, that would have gone a long way to strengthen the empirical rigor underlying her otherwise compelling thoughts. As a reader interested in thorough qualitative research methodology as a tool to ground theory, I would have preferred to see fuller reporting of all procedures used to assure empirical veracity of the data. While it certainly is true that “Doing ethnographic research is always dependent upon the good will and help of others” (xii), should qualitative research methods not go beyond simply trusting the respondents' good will? In my view, DeNora's laudable intention of presenting a research-based theory should have demanded no less, even if details were relegated to footnotes.

This book was brought to my attention as a music educator who has long argued for the inclusion of sociological thinking in the way we theorize, conduct research, and implement practical decisions about instructional and curricular matters in schools, colleges, and universities. I therefore welcome with enthusiasm any sociologist's efforts to help us develop an interdisciplinary dialogue about the nature of music and its cultural significance in the lives of non-musicians. Such a dialogue can benefit all who are concerned about the way humans construct their daily lives in work and leisure with the help of music, issues music educators clearly have not examined often and thoroughly enough.

DeNora's probing testifies to the need of sociological thinking in music education for the following reasons, and in the following ways:

1. Music educators must begin to take seriously the notion of music as an important social phenomenon (as opposed to an artistic or aesthetic phenomenon alone), if we

truly want to reach our students ‘where they are’ musically and socially. Sociological analyses of musical behavior are at least as relevant in the academic canon of learning as are analyses typically conducted by music theorists and musicologists. Most importantly, music majors should not have to wait until graduate study to be introduced to the type of questions sociologists ask about music as a social influence and artifact. Such knowledge would better prepare future music teachers (regardless of what the institutional setting) to understand the diversity of musical realities our students encounter in their lives – and to tailor their instructional practices to these more effectively.

2. DeNora makes a strong case for understanding the act of listening to music as an active action rather than a passive “by-standing.” In her exploration of music in the context of aerobics classes, for example, she refers to the class participants as “active sense-makers” (95), a term music educators could benefit from in the planning and execution of so-called “listening lessons.” Listeners are active participants in the “musicking” process, a term coined by Small (1998) in his provocative book of the same title. Perhaps Small’s thoughts also could have helped DeNora in her critique of the long-held musicological tradition of focusing all analyses on the musical work (the composition) as the primary and, at times, sole source of understanding what music is.

3. DeNora’s reference to the field of socio-linguistics points music educators to a crucial analytic tool by which to analyze the context-specific nature of all analyses

that deal with interdependence of a particular “text object” and the person interacting with it that object. She states:

An analyst of spoken interaction cannot ... deduce meaning from a particular text object, whether that object is one of utterance or an entire conversation, to which he or she was not party unless he or she is familiar with local circumstances that surround it. To do so is to ply an interpretation – the analyst's own account – upon that utterance. And in so doing, the analyst makes a fateful shift; he or she becomes party to the creation of meaning within that scene; his or her ‘map’ of conversational significance becomes, as it were, a comment upon or way of framing meaning within that scene ... To determine the meaning of an utterance from outside is thus to forgo an opportunity to investigate how particular actors produce indigenous maps and readings of the scene(s) in question and how to read them. Real actors engage in semiotic analysis as part of the reflexive project of context determination and context renewal. (37-8)

In my opinion, music educators in the United States by and large have ignored the connection between research in social-linguistics and music learning. This may be in large part due to the seeming reluctance of many a musicologist to equate or conflate music with language, the unfortunate result of which is the all-too-common practice of separating musical work from social context in most music (education) curricula and much music (education) research. As a sociologist, DeNora is at ease approaching music as a form of language that means what it does only in virtue of its specific social context. Her book is but one approach of documenting the ways music “becomes what it is”: it is, however, an important one with which music educators should become more conversant.

Particularly noteworthy is her theoretical exploration (in a chapter examining music and the body) of what constitutes “context” (i.e., environment) and what constitutes “the body itself.” Her treatment raises important questions about music

and self, an issue highly relevant for any research on the subjects of musical cognition, perception, or identity. She states:

No longer axiomatic, the question where the body ‘ends’ and the environment ‘begins’ is converted from a resource – ‘the’ body and ‘its’ processes – into a topic for (situated) research on body constitution. The body – its limits, processes, capacities, thresholds -- is reconceived as an emergent and flexible entity, as reflexively linked to the material-cultural environment and what that environment may afford. (87)

A little later, she continues:

We need more extended examples of what it means, at the level of real-time, spatially located existence, to speak of musical latching, and we need to illustrate in far greater detail what it means to describe music as an ordering device of bodily process. One way to begin to explore this process is through an investigation of body-music interactions as they occur in real time. (88)

This would truly be a great research agenda for anybody concerned about the interrelationship of mind and body in the music making process, and an even more important issue for music schooling!

4. Of equal significance to DeNora’s questions on music and the body are the sections in which she explores music as a device of social ordering (109 ff.), music as a provider of social organization (p.125), and music as a creator of social space (133). Again, while not entirely new in the literature outside of sociology, the ramifications of this knowledge for music educators are immediate and practical. For example, the fact that “music constructs scenes” of which the participants may or may not be fully aware (123), has a direct bearing on how students respond to how concerts are being programmed as well as how teachers select repertoire and, in general, make musical choices. With a few exceptions, current practice in United States music education

continues to focus almost exclusively on skill development and the accumulation of basic *musical* knowledge. As a result, music educators are not always aware that the very material by which we teach those musical skills and knowledge carries social messages that may or may not be desirable, and may or may not be embraced by the students we teach. The performance of particular repertoire, therefore, triggers more than associations. It creates social context, i.e., reality, which may either reinforce or oppose the students' own social realities. Thus, if the teacher makes repertoire choices, more is at stake than whether or not a particular text is suitable for the age of the singers or certain passages in the piece are too easy or too difficult for the students to perform. What we play or to what we listen either asserts or questions the power relationships in which we find ourselves, creates associations of belonging or not-belonging, and leads to or takes away from feelings of alienation or affirmation. While any or all of these relationships may be perceived as “non-rational orderings” (155), they are real, important, powerful, and, ultimately, political. This last conclusion is, in my view, the strongest point DeNora makes and I hope that she will continue to explore it in greater detail in the future.

The significance of music serving not only as a symbolizing agent but also as a social force that constructs power relationships cannot be overstated because no longer can music be relegated to the realm of the “merely” aesthetic alone. To do so means to misunderstand one's own political place in society. Music educators in particular must face that reality and be aware that the acts of music making and listening are political “gestures” by which social relationships are forged. Teachers themselves, then, are

political agents who play an active part in creating a person's everyday experience with music. The question that remains is what types of social relationships we want to forge during the time we are responsible for what the students learn as a part of their school curriculum. It is an uncomfortable question with answers that may well be uncomfortable as well. DeNora challenges us to that task, however.

As it currently stands, DeNora's data, as limited as they had to be (given the interviewing process itself), seem to suggest that music in a person's everyday life may be far removed from "school" music as we know it. The challenge now lies in gathering data that either confirm or reject this hypothesis. Then, dependent upon the findings, music educators need to develop curricular strategies that bring everyday music and "school" music closer together. Sociological inquiry therefore is a MUST in music education, not simply an academic luxury reserved for graduate school. DeNora's explorations make this very clear. Any music educator who either agrees or disagrees with the conclusion of her findings now should feel compelled to engage in similar types of inquiry, thereby expanding and strengthening the dialogue about the place, role and function music holds in everyone's life, both during schooling and as leisure pursuit. Whether we agree or disagree with DeNora's conclusions, the dialogue between the disciplines must go on and gain in rigor as we increase our awareness of each other's work.

Reference

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