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How Music Works–Beyond the Immanent and the Arbitrary
An Essay Review of *Music in Everyday Life*

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Tia DeNora's book, *Music in Everyday Life*, is about the power of music. It explores the proposition that music is capable of creating and influencing moods, emotions, and the ability to concentrate, and establishing a basis for individual and collective action. It also explores the proposition that music acts powerfully on the body, not just as an external presence, but as a constitutive agent that serves to form and activate the body in particular ways in particular situations. By joining these two major strands of exploration, the book then proposes that music, by acting as a resource and progenitor of individual agency, operates as a force for social ordering at the level of collectivities as well as that of individual behaviour. An important theme of the book is that, rather than being peripheralized as an object of study in sociology, music should become much more central to the discipline. It should do so as a way of contributing to an increasing body of literature that understands the aesthetic not only as an important and integral aspect of social life, but as a springboard for social action. As DeNora argues, 'adding music to the catalogue of cultural materials or devices of ordering contributes a whole new dimension to the focus of human – non-human interaction.' It dispenses, she continues, 'with the notion that society is merely "people doing things".' DeNora concludes, 'it brings into relief the expressive and aesthetic dimension of

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ordering activity, a topic too often ignored in favour of cognitive and discursive "skill"' (109).

Many of the arguments presented in the book are not in themselves new, although it is both novel and gratifying to witness a contemporary sociologist arguing that music should become much more central to the discipline. However, this book does distinguish itself from previous work to do with emotion, the body, social ordering and music's power in three important ways. Firstly, as a sociologist, DeNora explores these themes empirically, by interviewing women of all ages about their use of music, by conducting fieldwork in aerobics classes, and by carrying out qualitative research in the retail sector. Secondly, this detailed and grounded research is complemented by a theoretical sophistication concerning the issue of how music works that goes well beyond the majority of extant literature in this field. Finally, the empirical and the theoretical is woven into a finely balanced text that brims with insight and thought-provoking arguments. It is a book that is accessible and extremely well written.

Music in Everyday Life may emerge as one of the most important books written on music during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. One reason for this is the way the book is positioned in relation to debates that have characterized much academic writing on music since the late-1970s, debates that in many ways owe their genesis to the work of Theodor Adorno. It was during the mid- to late-1970s that the notion of music – which was to say, classical music – as an ideal and autonomous artistic form with immanent meanings essentially impervious to the influence of cultural and social processes came to be challenged in a continuous and consistent fashion. This

challenge originated both from within and outside the world of academic music. One element common to this challenge was the arrival in the academic world of a generation of scholars weaned on the musical, cultural and political experiences of the 1960s. Within musicology, scholars for whom popular music had been an important formative influence biographically found it difficult to accept that popular music was not as worthy of study as classical music. They could not accept that popular music's self-evidently social character was essential evidence of its inferiority and sufficient reason for its exclusion from the academy. Rather, they saw within popular music the possibility of a new avenue of study for music in general. That is, they saw the possibility of understanding music not as a pristine artistic form unsullied by the gray forces of mass social process – such 'sullying' producing popular music – but as a cultural form that was socially constituted (see, for example, Shepherd *et al*., 1977).

In this, the work of these musicologists had a great deal in common with a foundational premise of ethnomusicology: that music could not be understood in isolation from the social and cultural circumstances of its creation, practice and consumption. However, while ethnomusicological work was by definition based on fieldwork and owed much to social anthropology, this new trajectory in musicology was theoretical, drawing for its inspiration on recent developments within sociology (see, for example, Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Similar developments occurred within the related fields of cultural studies and sociology. The late-1970s witnessed in the form of subcultural theory some remarkable insights into the social character of many cultural forms including popular music (see, for example, Willis, 1987 and Hebdige, 1979). The study of popular music

(see also Frith, 1978) – together with the study of classical music as a social form – was here to stay.

One of the early concerns of more radical approaches to the study of music was how music signifies. This concern arose because the central theoretical argument that opened up new intellectual spaces for the study of music was that music – all music, including classical music – was socially constituted. If music's meanings were socially constituted, it was incumbent on scholars to explain how, to show that music signified socially rather than in any other way. For perfectly understandable reasons, conventional musicology not only resisted such arguments, but chose, as it had done for many years, to ignore the issue of how music signifies and to marginalize it as a legitimate area of research in the discipline. One cannot help recalling Claude Palisca arguing in the 1960s that 'musical aesthetics is not musical scholarship; it is musical experience and musical theory converging upon a philosophical problem.' Aesthetics, he concluded, 'does not rest on documentary or similar evidence but on philosophical and psychological principles tested by experience' (1963, 110).

This issue of how music signifies and resistance to it on the part of conventional musicology was put front and centre by Susan McClary in the early 1990s. 'I was drawn to music,' she said, 'because it is the most compelling cultural form I know. I wanted evidence that the overwhelming responses I experience . . . are not just my own, but rather are shared.' However, McClary soon discovered that 'musicology fastidiously declares issues of musical signification off-limits to those engaged in legitimate scholarship' (1991, 4). In uncovering the reasons for this neglect, McClary identified the

everyday and the corporeal, the quintessentially social and material elements of musical practice that conventional musicology has been at such pains to eschew. 'Most people care about music because it resonates with experiences that otherwise go unarticulated, whether it is the flood of cathartic release that occurs at the climax of a Tchaikowsky symphony or the groove that causes one's body to dance,' argues McClary. However, she continues, 'our music theories and notational systems do everything possible to mask those dimensions of music that are related to physical human experience and focus instead on the orderly, the rational, the cerebral' (1990, 14). Musicology, she concludes, 'has seized disciplinary control over the study of music and has prohibited the asking of even the most fundamental questions concerning meaning . . . something terribly important is being hidden away by the profession' (1991, 4).

As these new trajectories in the study of music moved through the 1980s and into the 1990s, two developments occurred. The first was that sociology as the prime mover of a more radical set of approaches to the study of music began to recede as intellectual movements such as feminism, poststructuralism, psychoanalytic theory, and postmodern and postcolonial theory came to the fore. The second was that theory, the lever essential within the academic world for creating new intellectual spaces for the study of music, began to lose its generative power and influence. Having, as it were, opened the door, theory working largely but not exclusively on its own would no longer suffice. Something more was needed. As Sara Cohen put it at the beginning of the 1990s in her book on *Rock Culture in Liverpool*, 'what is particularly lacking in the literature . . . is ethnographic data and micro-sociological detail' (1991, 6). Such detail was provided by

Finnegan (1989), Weinstein (1991), and the 'Music in Daily Life Project' (Crafts, Cavicchi and Keil, 1993). It has also been provided by a generation of ethnomusicologists interested in popular music (see, for example, Manuel, 1988; Waterman, 1990; Stokes, 1992; Guilbault, 1993; Slobin, 1993; and Erlmann, 1996). As fieldwork and ethnomusicology grew in importance, questions of location and identity (see, for example, Lipsitz, 1994, Stokes, 1994, and Leyshon, Matliss and Revill, 1998) became more central to the study of music. Indeed, a new kind of conventionality in the progressive study of music seemed to be replacing that symptomatic of established musicology some thirty years earlier. As Born and Hesmondhalgh recently observed, 'a common problematic across musicology, ethnomusicology and popular music in recent years has been the theorization of music and identity and, by implication, difference' (2000, 2). Central to these developments has been postcolonial theory. The sociological question whose exploration some twenty years earlier had opened up new intellectual spaces for the study of music – the question of how music is constituted, how it signifies – receded increasingly from view.

This is the environment in which DeNora's book is likely to make a major impact. DeNora's book is concerned centrally with the question of how music works. However, in leaving behind earlier forms of theoreticism, emphasizing fieldwork and the empirical, seeing questions of identity as central to her work, and marrying all these concerns in a wonderfully seamless text, DeNora's book can be seen as an heir as well as a challenge to many trends current in the academic study of music. In the process, it is also a most telling challenge to the empirically-based conservatism of established forms of

musicology. One wonders how Palisca would respond to theories of the social constitution of the musically aesthetic based on detailed empirical work.

For DeNora, the question of how music works is one that ‘remains opaque.’ The reason it remains opaque, she continues, is that ‘it is rarely pursued from the “ground level” of social action.’ DeNora concludes that ‘too much writing within the sociology of music – and cultural studies more widely – is abstract and ephemeral’ (x). As she quite correctly observes, ‘implicit in much work devoted to the question of musical affect is an epistemological premise.’ This premise is that ‘the semiotic force of musical works can be decoded or read, and that, through this decoding, semiotic analysis may specify how given musical examples will “work” in social life.’ The analyst’s task ‘may be confined to the consideration of aesthetic forms; music’s users thus hardly need to be consulted,’ and ‘there is no need for (time-consuming) ethnographic research.’ The limits of this approach ‘derive from a particular theoretical shortcut taken by semiotic analysts as they slide from readings of works to discussions of the social impact of those works.’ The analyst’s interpretation becomes ‘a resource rather than a topic’ (21-22). The reading of the analyst or critic in this way becomes uncritically generalisable, unjustifiably attributing to others meanings and affects they had no role in constructing. While ‘music may be, seems to be, or is, interlinked to “social” matters,’ argues DeNora, these links ‘should not be presumed.’ Rather, she concludes, ‘their mechanisms of operation need to be demonstrated’ (4). The role of the user or consumer of music, maintains DeNora, is crucial to the business of the construction of meaning and affect through music.

DeNora thus sees the question of how music works as an essentially ethnographic one. However, her approach is precisely not that of ethnography bereft of theory. Unlike other ethnographers unsympathetic to theory, who simply claim that music's meanings can be understood only by talking to people about their use of music – no more need for theory – DeNora makes a theoretically sophisticated case for the necessity of fieldwork. She then uses that fieldwork to inform in crucially important ways her theoretically oriented discussions. This marriage of theory and the empirical in DeNora's work precludes the often unspoken assumption that meanings are simply projected onto music by individuals: 'while music's semiotic force can be seen to be constructed in and through listener appropriations, a focus on how people interact with music should also be concerned with . . . the role of music's *specific properties* may play in this construction process' (24). The significance of music is thus neither arbitrary nor immanent. In steering between 'technologism and sociologism '(40) – the views either that music determines meanings or that social forces visit meanings on music – DeNora draws on Gibson's (1966) notion of 'affordances': 'objects "afford" actors certain things; a ball, for example, affords rolling, bouncing and kicking in a way that a cube of the same size, texture and weight would not' (39). Music's characteristics are thus guiding, shaping, and facilitating. However, they are not determining. Thus, '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).

Music is thus a technology of the self to whose mechanisms individuals contribute indelibly. Music plays a crucial role in the construction, maintenance and negotiation of identity. It does this through its appeal to the body. In theorizing the body, DeNora shifts the focus away from 'what the body "is" (and what can be done "to" it), to a focus on what the body may become as it is situated within different contexts and from within different terms of reference' (75). The boundary between the body and its environment, both culturally and physical, is porous, allowing and facilitating interactions that are important if not fundamental to the body's constitution. Where both culture and music are concerned, this moves discussions 'away from discourses of the body and . . . towards a focus on body-culture interaction.' In this way, 'a grounded theory of the body's cultural constitution has the capacity to move well beyond semiotic readings of bodily meanings.' It is 'linked to a theory of culture as something much more than a decorative overlay for bodily phenomena.' Music can thus be understood 'as intrinsic to the constitution of the body and its physical processes, as something that can enter into and formulate bodily realities.' Such a theorization of cultural power, concludes DeNora, 'extends well beyond the usual concern with the meanings of art objects as it conceptualizes their power at a more existential level of human being where body, consciousness and feeling intertwine' (76-77).

These relations are illuminated through DeNora's discussion of the use of music in neonatal units. Music has come to be used increasingly to counteract the disruptive effects the somewhat random and disturbing noises of these units have on the physiological processes of premature babies. The concept of 'entrainment' is important in

understanding music's beneficial effects. Musically entrained, says DeNora, 'the body and its processes unfold in relation to musical elements (in these examples, its regular pulse); they are aligned and regularized in relation to music, they are musically organized, musically "composed".' The principle of entrainment can be extended to understanding the relations between music and other forms of bodily behaviour such as dance: 'dance and more mundane and subconscious forms of choreography are media for the autodidactic accumulation of self and gender awareness' (78). Thus, 'musical entrainment and its observable character . . . provide a clear example of how environmental materials and their properties may be said to afford or provide resources for particular kinds of bodies and bodily states, state that are regularized and reproduced over time' (79). In affording such resources, 'it must be remembered that music is a physical medium, that it consists of sound waves, vibrations that the body may feel even when it cannot hear.' Music thus 'affords a kind of auditory device on to which one can latch in some way or another, in relation to some or other bodily activity or process' (86). The simplest examples of latching involve 'movement to music, whether toe tapping or finger snapping, or more complex movement styles that merge into what we would normally refer to as dance.' In these ways, 'the body . . . engages in movements that are organized in relation to, and in some way homologous with, music's properties, its ways of happening, such as tempo, rhythm, or gestural devices, and so becomes entrained with the music' (161). An understanding of these processes is informed and illustrated through the fieldwork in aerobic classes.

There are two dimensions to *Music in Everyday Life*. The first has to do with music's social force, its relations to issues of social power. In the way that it approaches these issues, the book differs from much other contemporary work on music that has viewed issues of identity and difference as central. This work has been subject to criticism. As Born and Hesmonhalgh report, the postcolonial theory that has been so important to recent developments in the cultural study of music 'has been criticized' for treating issues of power 'almost entirely in terms of textuality and epistemology' and sidelining 'material conditions and the possibility of political practices oriented towards changing material conditions' (2000, 6). It is clear that DeNora has moved considerably beyond issues of textuality and epistemology in her understanding of how music works. The terms 'meaning' and 'signification' no longer seem to do justice to processes that are performative, material and engaged. And it is clear also that she is concerned with this performative and material role of music as it is implicated in the politics of everyday life: 'at a time when pubic spaces are increasingly being privatized, and when "people management" principles from McDonald's and Disneyland are increasingly applied to shopping precincts, sociologists need to focus much more closely on music's social role.' The concern here is with 'music as a social "force" – and with the relations of music's production and deployment in specific circumstances.' This concern 'merges with a fundamental concern within sociology with the interface between the topography of material cultural environments, social action, power and subjectivity' (19).

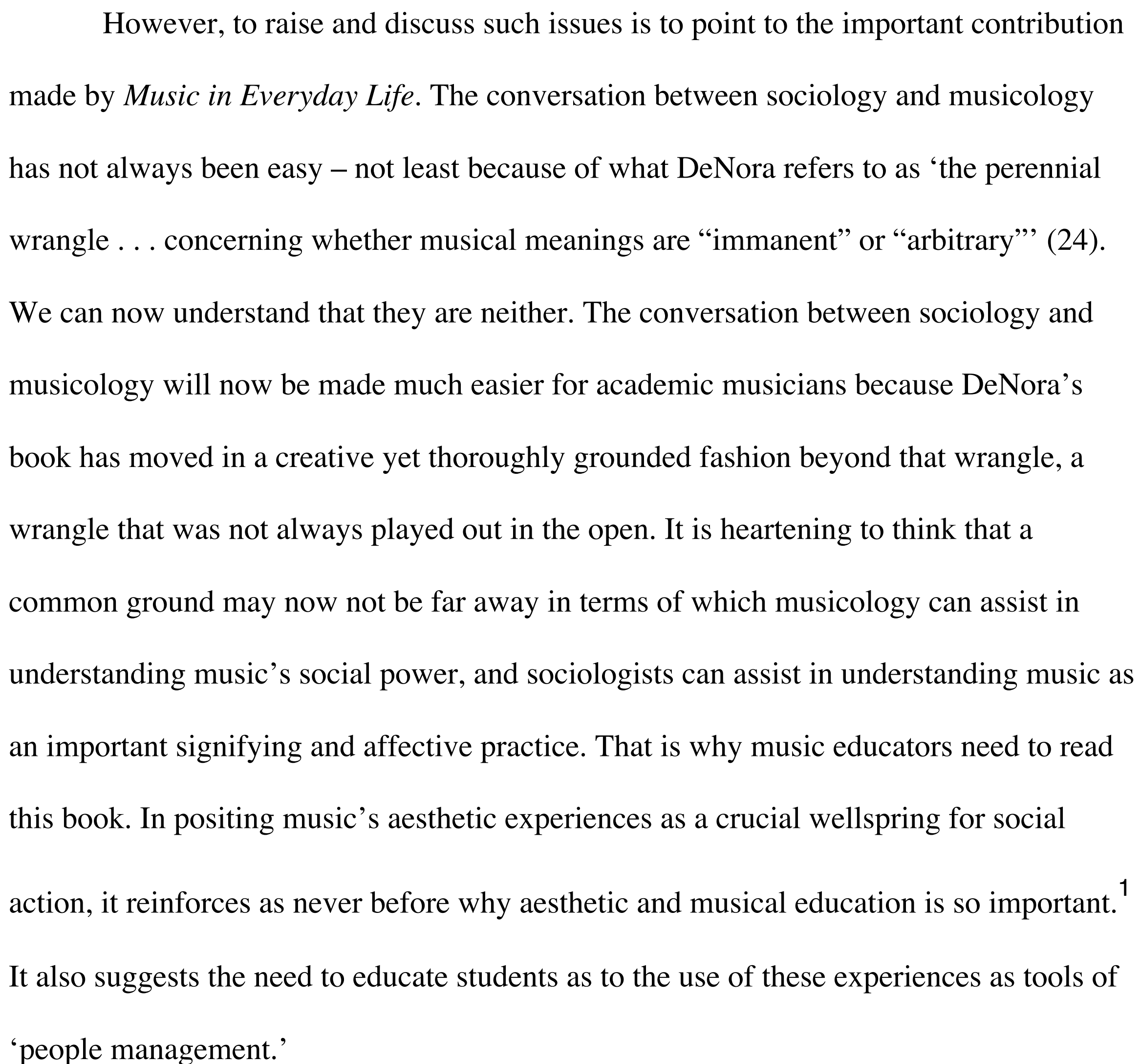
The second, related, dimension concerns the matter of 'how to specify music's semiotic force.' This concern gives rise to the following questions: 'In what way should

we specify music's links to social and embodied meanings and to forms of feeling? How much of music's power to affect the shape of human agency can be attributed to music alone? And to what extent are these questions about music affiliated with more general social science concerns with the power of artefacts and their ability to interest, enrol and transform their users?' (20). In contrast to the first dimension, which is clearly more sociological in character, this second dimension is more musicological, and it is perhaps the dimension that DeNora deals with less successfully. Because, for all the discussion of affordance, entrainment and latching, there never clearly emerges a picture of exactly how music's semiotic force works.

A hint as to how DeNora could have moved forward on this issue is contained in her appeal to the notion of 'music prosthetic technology.' Prosthetic technologies, explains DeNora, 'are materials that extend what the body can do – for example, steam shovels, stilts, microscopes or amplification systems enhance and transform the capacities of arms, legs, eyes and voices.' Thus, 'through the creation and *use* of such technologies actors (bodies) are enabled and empowered, their capacities are enhanced . . . they are capacitated in and through their ability to appropriate what such technologies afford' (103). The point here is that the material through which music is recognized as music is sound, and a particular, non-denotative use of sound at that. This is surely the technology to which DeNora refers. Sound offers up potentials for communication and expression, one of which is actualized in conjunction with other material resources to bring into being the cultural artefact that we recognize as 'music.' In being thus actualized, the musical use of sound can, indeed, be thought of as a 'prosthetic technology.' But perhaps the

stress here should be as much on introversion as extension. In this context, it is useful to recall DeNora's observation that music 'is a physical medium, that it consists of sound waves, vibrations that the body may feel even when it cannot hear.' The sounds of music enter the body and are sensed, felt and experienced inside the body in a way that, on the whole, the media of other artistic and cultural forms are not. And if one accepts the notion of affordance, then it is not a big step to realizing that there is an element of direct material leverage in the manner in which the sounds of music serve to construct and position individuals in their embodied, everyday lives. This element, which on the whole is not present in the media of other artistic and cultural forms, is what guarantees music its specific character, its specific semiotic force, without for one moment reducing the capacity of listeners to create and negotiate meanings and affective states through it.

This 'technology of articulation,' as it has elsewhere been termed, makes possible a performative semiological model for understanding music's power that leaves behind the problems with the semiotics of music identified by DeNora (Shepherd and Wicke, 1997). Such a model understands the purpose of semiotics as explaining the character of the connection or inter-penetration between various media of communication and expression on the one hand and individual subjects on the other, rather than as providing a shopping list of meanings. Grounding music's semiotic force in its specific material conditions provides a starting point from which to begin to answer DeNora's questions about how much of music's power can be attributed to music alone, and about the degree to which the ability of music to interest, enrol and transform its users can be affiliated with more general social science concerns with the similar power of other artefacts. It can



be suggested that understanding music's social power in this way may well provide insights for understanding such power on the part of other artefacts, thus underlining DeNora's view that 'sociologists need to focus much more closely on music's social role.'

However, to raise and discuss such issues is to point to the important contribution made by *Music in Everyday Life*. The conversation between sociology and musicology has not always been easy – not least because of what DeNora refers to as 'the perennial wrangle . . . concerning whether musical meanings are "immanent" or "arbitrary"' (24). We can now understand that they are neither. The conversation between sociology and musicology will now be made much easier for academic musicians because DeNora's book has moved in a creative yet thoroughly grounded fashion beyond that wrangle, a wrangle that was not always played out in the open. It is heartening to think that a common ground may now not be far away in terms of which musicology can assist in understanding music's social power, and sociologists can assist in understanding music as an important signifying and affective practice. That is why music educators need to read this book. In positing music's aesthetic experiences as a crucial wellspring for social action, it reinforces as never before why aesthetic and musical education is so important.[1] It also suggests the need to educate students as to the use of these experiences as tools of 'people management.'

[1] *Editor's note*: Issues concerning different connotations of the word "aesthetic" for certain readers and the professional debates concerning its use in discussions of music and music education were brought to the attention of this essay's author in the editorial process. More specifically, questions were raised about the use in this context of a word with such intimate historical linkage to the ideology of immanence – an ideology so effectively challenged in this project. Shepherd's response makes points that warrant careful consideration. He writes, "I would have hoped it was clear both from DeNora's work and my own that our notion of 'the aesthetic' is of a phenomenon that is socially constituted. The reason we both continue to use the word, I suspect, is that it covers a range of human activities and experiences that is difficult to subsume under other categories without altering the sense of what we are referring to. If my use of the phrase 'aesthetic education' carries with it implications of the immanent, that is certainly not my intention. But I would not want to dispense with the word completely. It has been significantly recontextualised away from its immanent connotations by much twentieth-century work in cultural theory. I think the really important thing is to gain acceptance for a use of this word that dispenses with the notion of immanence and takes the social constitution of all aspects of human experience as given."

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