Review Essay/Essai rendu

Teaching Music Sociology

Joseph Kotarba and **Phillip Vannini**, *Understanding Society through Popular Music*. New York: Routledge, 2009, 192 pp. $US 29.95 paper (978-0-415-95409-9), $US 125.00 hardcover (978-0-415-95408-2)

Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008, 280 pp. $US 22.00 paper with CD (978-0-226-81697-5), $US 55.00 cloth with CD (978-0-226-81698-2)

Most of the grand statements on the sociology of music (e.g., by Theodor Adorno, Paul Honigsheim, Alphons Silbermann), however insightful, are outdated. There are numerous excellent studies *in* the sociology of music (e.g., Tia DeNora, Simon Frith, Richard Peterson), but these tend to be too specific to be good textbooks, in and of themselves. So the teacher of music sociology is left with two options: assemble a reading pack, or write the course material from scratch. Both of the books under review here — Joseph Kotarba and Phillip Vannini's *Understanding Society through Popular Music,* and Thomas Turino's *Music as Social Life*— are designed with teaching in mind.

Understanding Society through Popular Music aims to "integrate growing interest in the sociological study of popular music with mainstream sociological instruction" (p. xi). To accomplish this, Kotarba and Vannini carve the book into seven chapters, which are meant to parallel topic divisions that appear in general introductory sociology courses (the family, deviance, the economy, politics/ideology, race/class/gender, the self, globalization). Each chapter observes roughly the same structure: a neat and tidy presentation of the most pertinent sociological literature, followed by a series of examples drawn from Kotarba and Vannini's own work in the sociology of music. In this way, sociology and popular music are folded into one another.

The conceptual chassis of the book, outlined plainly and helpfully in the introductory chapter, is built by welding the somewhat high flying critical-theoretical impulses of the Frankfurt and Birmingham schools to the more pragmatic concerns of constructionism and interactionism. This combination of contradictory traditions is usually fruitful, although they don't always mix well as one occasionally, and perhaps confusingly for students, overpowers the other.

Some of the strongest chapters are also the most familiar ones, sociologically speaking. "The Family" and "Deviance" are of course established sociological topics; but what makes these chapters unique and creative in this book is the relative lack of attention to such issues in music scholarship. Highlighting the role of popular music as a means to familial socialization and integration, as well as a possible bridge between generations, the chapter on the family not only argues against popular music as a social problem (the mark of an unruly youth culture), but uses constructionism to problematize the nature of "social problems" in the first place. The following chapter does something similar for the notion of deviance. After grounding their discussion in Howard Becker's early work on labeling and drug use among jazz musicians, the authors go on to analyze the relationship of drug and music discourses, and the connections between certain states of intoxication and particular types of music, especially in current dance cultures like rave.

The book comes with a companion website, which includes PowerPoint summaries, essay questions and quizzes for each chapter, as well as a long list of web resources (from Becker's homepage and the Sociology Index, to MTV India and celebrity-gossip.net). These resources have been thoughtfully prepared and will certainly enhance the book's usefulness as a teaching tool.

Understanding Society through Popular Music presents complex ideas clearly, concisely and casually. While there were occasions when Kotarba and Vannini's attempts to write with a laid back and "with it" tone felt contrived, there were also, more substantially, moments where conciseness slid into oversimplification. It was a bit discouraging, for example, to see declarations that "music is a universal language that people can immediately relate to and share" (p. 127). Such a statement not only cuts against the critical sociological thinking that the book is usually so good at fostering, but actually reheats an ethnocentric ideology that many musicologists have fought hard to discredit.

In the same chapter ("Globalization"), I found the discussion of world music and authenticity equally problematic. The authors begin by arguing that more obviously rooted cultural identities and traditions are not necessarily "authentic," while those that are globalized and hybrid

— i.e., less obviously attached to some cultural origin or "ground-zero" — are somehow "inauthentic." "Authenticity and hybridity are not opposed to one another," they point out, "but entangled in configurations only typical of an interconnected world" (p. 137). This much is true and, as an exercise in demystifying categories, a good example of constructionist thinking. But when, invoking Simon Frith's essay "The Discourse of World Music" (2000), Kotarba and Vannini go on to suggest that "hybridity may very well be 'the new authenticity'" (p. 137), they misrepresent Frith's point. It's true that Frith does talk about hybridity as a kind of authenticity, but he is not championing this view, nor proffering hybridity as a more positive political mindset for globalized musical practices (as Kotarba and Vannini seem to be doing). Rather, Frith is critiquing this ideology, on a discursive level, as "the academic argument that best suits (and is most used by) world music companies." In short, hybridity *is* a new form of authenticity, but this insight is less useful for critically analyzing world music than it is selling it.

Problems like these are important to mention but, in the end, the good outweighs the bad. The greatest strength and, for the most part, success of Kotarba and Vannini's *Understanding Society through Popular Music* is the way it indelibly impresses the idea of a sociological imagination in relation to music. While upper-year undergraduates will probably be ready for more solid food, early undergraduate sociology students with an interest in music, and music students with an interest in sociology, stand to gain a lot from this book.

Like *Understanding Society through Popular Music*, the seeds of *Music as Social Life* were planted when, after looking around for resources to help him revise his large music survey classes, Turino "found no texts that synthesized the conceptual frameworks that [he] wanted to teach in a form that was practical and accessible for assignments" (p. xvi).

Following an introduction that asks, broadly, "Why Music Matters" (a question that is addressed using the anthropology of Gregory Bateson, the semiotics of Charles Peirce, and the psychology of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi), *Music as Social Life* is split into roughly two halves. Chapters 2–4 outline the concepts of music making and socialization that underlie the case studies found in Chapters 5–7. Turino's most original contribution comes in the first half, where he forges his own fourfold framework for understanding music.

Turino's first move is to separate *participatory* and *presentational* fields of music making. The names almost speak for themselves: whereas participatory music making refers in a restricted sense to active participation and real-time performance in which there is no exact distinction

between musicians and audience, presentational music making involves "one group of people (the artists) providing music for another (the audience)" (p. 51). Next, Turino divides sound recording into *high fidelity* and *studio audio art*, the other two major fields of the book. Again, the labels are intuitive: high fidelity "refers to musical sounds heard on recordings that index or are iconic of live performance" (p. 67), while studio audio art "is patently a studio form with no suggestion or expectation that it should or even could be performed live in real time" (p. 78).

Performance is parsed into the participatory and the presentational, while sound recording is cleaved into high fidelity and studio audio art. These are, of course, sweeping categories. Turino stresses that they are not absolute or final, and admits that there are musical sounds and communities that might challenge or require refinement of his fields (e.g., online music making). Still, as starting points the four-fields framework is rich and suggestive. One of the most appealing aspects of this framework is that it doesn't necessarily divide music along generic lines. Instead, it enables Turino (and encourages students) to read across, and draw connections between seemingly disparate musical cultures. As Turino notes, while "on the surface, indigenous Shona music of Zimbabwe, Peruvian Aymara music, and Midwestern contra dance music sound nothing alike … below the surface, these three types of music making share a variety of sound features, basic principles of organization, and performance practice" (p. 36).

Turino is also concerned with the ways certain elements of musical sound can foster certain modes of social relationship (and vice versa). Take, for example, the professionalized and specialized music of the presentational and high fidelity fields that pervade advanced capitalist societies, or the inclusively loose tunings, textural density, melodic and structural repetitiveness that characterize participatory traditions. This kind of attention to the specifics of music itself is actually a source of tension in music sociology: the jury is still out on the question of how to write a *sociology* of music that is also a sociology of *music*, to twist a phrase used by musicologist Carl Dahlhaus. Turino not only does a good job of avoiding musicological jargon (when he does find it necessary to use specifically musical terminology he takes care to explain himself), he integrates social and musical specifics both adroitly and fluidly.

While the conceptual discussions of the early chapters are teeming with examples, it is in the latter half of the book where Turino explicitly employs a series of case studies to illustrate his general arguments. The first case presented is the rise (via colonization) of presentational and high-fidelity music in Zimbabwe, and its co-existence with earlier participatory traditions. Next, Turino turns his attention to old-time music

and dance in the USA. Here he contrasts cultural formations and cohorts. He shows that some communities — especially rural ones — still sing and dance together as part of their way of life ("people within that formation would interact even if the dances didn't exist," p. 160), while for others "old time music and dance are the basis of a cultural cohort that comes together for those activities" and "is mainly a community in relation to the dance and music" (pp. 159–160). Even though Turino is careful to say that "in contrasting the settings where old-time is a basic part of a cultural formation as opposed to being a cohort I am not suggesting that one is more *authentic* than the other" (p. 161, his emphasis), his preference for cultural formations seems transparent.

Similarly, Turino unapologetically favours the participatory field; he believes in its political potential above all the others (thus the book's subtitle, *The Politics of Participation*). He emphasizes this field

> because participatory music is both the 'most democratic' — potentially involving the most people — and the least understood and valued within the capitalist-cosmopolitan formation. One goal for creating the four-fields framework is to redress this imbalance. (p. 92)

To his credit, Turino is upfront about his bias, and he does attempt to outline the other fields evenhandedly (although his favoritism still bleeds through).

Rounding out the case studies, "Music and Political Movements" looks at Nazi Germany and the US civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. While Turino successfully illustrates the potency of participatory singing in rallying people around a cause ("in one case singing 'I love everybody' helped people face bricks and bats with courage and love, whereas in the other, singing 'Death to the Jew' fostered participation in, or acquiescence to, mass murder" p. 234), overall the chapter was disappointing. Part of the reason is perhaps because, unlike the other two extended case studies, here Turino's analyses are based on secondary sources. Additionally, these studies were more simplistic than the others, providing a lot of general background information on the Nazi regime and the civil rights movement, without really delivering the nuanced "semiotics of musical signs" promised at the outset.

One of the most refreshing parts of Turino's work is his near constant use of the phrase "music and dance." Despite being an integral part of many musical cultures, dance is typically neglected or at least downplayed in music scholarship. Although Turino isn't always explicit or rigorous in conceptualizing or analyzing the music-dance relationship, his simple insistence on using the two terms in the same breath should inspire the thinking of both students and researchers.

For teaching purposes, the book comes with a ten-track CD. The song selections (many of which Turino recorded himself) correspond to examples used in the text, and usefully demonstrate some of the central features of, and differences between, the four fields of music. Turino has also included an annotated discography guiding interested readers to other musical sources discussed in the text, as well as a helpful glossary of key concepts.

Music as Social Life builds a way of thinking about music (and dance) from the ground up. If this is the most obvious strength, and potentially enduring contribution, of the book in general (as a source of remarkable originality, insight, even wisdom), it is also a possible limitation on its appeal as a teaching tool — which is to say that, though a rich variety of theories and intellectual traditions undergird Turino's own ideas, he forgoes the kind of sustained literature reviews that can help students gain a solid footing in a field of study. Either way, Turino's framework is compelling, and any reader — whether student or researcher — is sure to come away from this book thinking about music at least a little bit more like Turino does.

A predictable way to end this review is by asking whether I would use either of these books as they are intended, in an introductory course on music and society. The answer is no, but my reasoning has less to do with the quality of the texts (which is high) than with the state of the field (which is still, perhaps perpetually, emerging). In its hundred-odd-year existence, the phrase "sociology of music" has never referred to a unified field of study. Instead, it has alluded to an unstable but particular set of theoretical and methodological problems, meaning that work in this area has been divided, disjointed, and discontinuous. But if that's part of what makes it difficult to find texts that suit the needs of individual music sociologists, it is also perhaps an important part of what keeps the discussion in this field so lively and interesting.

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