An Introduction to MUSIC STUDIES

Edited by
J. P. E. HARPER-SCOTT

and
JIM SAMSON
3 The sociology of music

KATHARINE ELLIS

Chapter preview

The relationships between music and the people who produce, perform, and use it are central to the sociology of music. This chapter introduces some of the central ideas of the sociology of music and helps you place it in the context of other approaches. Music is not just the sounds it makes. We like and value some musics and not others, as much because of our social and educational backgrounds, and because of the associations that accompany music, as because of musical style itself. We also include music as part of a wider collection of lifestyle choices. For that reason, the sociological study of music tends to explore the human networks around music, rather than the characteristics of musical style. Nevertheless, it covers contemporary and historical culture from several perspectives, and embraces all types of music. It gives priority to people-centered research methods where possible, to explore music’s social meanings; social networks and cultural capital; the shape of the music market; exclusivism and subcultural mentalities; and more general questions about the relationship between music and identity.

Key issues

- Sociologies of music: what are the main questions?
- The problem of “high art.”
- Are geniuses constructed, not born?
- “Art worlds” and the music business.
- “Cultural capital,” social status, and identity.

Introduction

Imagine that the music business has gone topsy-turvy. You walk towards a CD shop and the first music you hear is a piece of Western classical music blasting out over its entire ground floor. For the sake of argument let us say that it’s
Mendelssohn's overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream. It is No. 1. All your classmates know it and are talking about. It is being played on major radio stations several times a day, and, along with thousands of your peers, you have gone that very week to buy it. It would be uncool not to. Once inside the shop you see other people heading upstairs and downstairs to its darkest corners, where chart pop, film soundtracks, and various kinds of rock music are squeezed into small spaces behind soundproofed doors. By contrast, the space given over to jazz and to world music is huge. You start noticing interesting things about who is browsing where. The three people in the chart pop section are young, white, long-haired men wearing black leathers and chains. The jazz section has a few teenage girls in it, but most of them are queuing up with you for that Mendelssohn. The world music section is crammed with working-class pensioners buying in bulk.

This scenario is as crude as it is unlikely, but its "wrongness" helps us understand how deeply social music is, and how different groups of people tend to identify with different musical genres and styles. It also suggests how a commercial space such as a CD shop can act as a "map" of a subject-area and as an experimental laboratory (even though you will miss out on all those people downloading from the Web). But your own instincts will tell you a lot, even before you start to observe your human subjects, quiz them, and do a statistical analysis of your findings. What are your expectations? How many working-class pensioners have the disposable income to buy a luxury such as recorded music in large quantities? How many teenage girls are jazz fans? Are those men in black leather not more likely to be heading for the heavy metal section? The moment you begin to try to untangle my mismatches of space allocation, social type (age, gender, class, ethnicity), and musical category, you are already thinking about the relationships between individual people, social groups, social structures, and music. And that is what the sociology of music is primarily about.

**Sociologies of music**

Music is not usually the main focus of the sociology of music. Most of the time its subject is living people, the ways in which they organize their musical experience through institutions, in groups, and via the music market, and the ways in which they affect the ways music is produced, performed, consumed, and understood. For this reason, audiences, their tastes, and their behavior, are central - more so than composers or even performers. So are the people who, while not actually composing pieces of music, help make them happen. Systems of patronage, corporate management, and sponsorship are common subjects of sociological study, and tell us a great deal about how certain types of music are promoted and sustained, by (and for) whom, and why. And the study of group dynamics and power relations within and
between musical institutions (bands and record companies, conservatoires, orchestras), gives an insight into the harsh practicalities of a competitive music world in which the agendas of audiences, performers, teachers, conductors, songwriters, and management are often radically different.

All these subjects of study are subjects rooted in today's world, and they bring with them a set of research methods that emphasize direct access to the people being studied. The interview, the questionnaire, and the statistical survey are important tools for sociologists of music, who, like ethnomusicologists, spend much of their time talking to people, noting their responses, and analyzing them as evidence of an attitude, opinion, or taste. Sociology, however, can also be historical, and so can the sociology of music. Here, access to people's opinions and behavior is usually indirect, gleaned for instance via memoirs and letters, family reminiscences, photographs, advertising material, press reports, and old film footage. The questions a sociologist asks are fundamentally the same, though the emphasis tends to shift, and a specific type of music is placed center stage. What did people use this music for? How widely was it known, and among which social groups? What processes were necessary for it to reach the public domain? What did it mean to those who valued (or denigrated) it? How, finally, was it reinvented over time, through different arrangements or covers intended for different types of audience?

Of course, relationships are not just one-way: if, as is often said, dogs look like their owners, then owners must also look like their dogs. Does music, then, "look like" the social groups which identify closely with it? Or those who produced it in the first place? To use a common metaphor, can music "mirror," or "reflect" social structures? One particular branch of the sociology of music, stemming from the work of the German sociologist and philosopher Theodor Adorno (1903–69), explores this idea. For instance, when he wrote that serialism (Schoenberg's twelve-note method) was "totalitarian," Adorno was not commenting on the sound of Schoenberg's music, or analyzing its effect on audiences through surveys. Instead, he was offering his own critique, observing that the technique of serialism tied the composer's hands by effectively prescribing the order in which each pitch should appear. The result could never be "free," since it was not composed freely. Because it appeared to conflict with his own societal ideals, Adorno found serialism problematic as a method in which artists might voluntarily work. Free atonality, of course, was different altogether (see also Chapter 5).

It is worth dwelling a little on this kind of critique, in which aspects of society are seen as embedded within musical structure. This is because it has provided one of the most important recent links between sociology and historical musicology. For instance, when John Shepherd (a sociologist) and Susan McClary (a musicologist) each analyze the ways in which music encodes "male hegemony" (i.e., the domination of men over women in both society and culture), they are working from a similar starting point. They discuss the "ideal" images of masculinity and femininity that surround the music in society, and then
analyze the extent to which the music matches, resists, or possibly celebrates that reality. All elements of music are open to analysis from this point of view: harmony, themes, tonality, structure, timbre, instrumentation, and performance. McClary, for instance, has tended to concentrate on nineteenth-century ideas about masculinity, femininity, and sexuality. She has built on a famously graphic description of sonata form by the French composer Vincent d'Indy, dating from around 1898.

Here, a sequence of thematic ideas and tonal areas is described as a battle of the sexes in which the man (first theme/tonal area) conquers the woman (second theme/tonal area). Effectively, McClary asks the question: if this kind of social/musical equivalence is being taught to students (and it was), how deeply embedded must it have been in the music they and their predecessors studied, wrote, and performed?

Shepherd, who in 1990 published a book called Music as Social Text (and that tells us a lot in itself), has written about the importance of timbre and voice production. He has identified as "masoch" timbres such as those characteristic of Mick Jagger - a rasping sound created mostly in the throat and mouth. By contrast, he has described the idealized sounds of woman-as-carer (common in ballad singing, for instance) as warmer and richer, because its vocal production is more relaxed and comes from the chest. Quoting the blues specialist Paul Oliver, he has noted how certain female blues singers such as Bessie Smith crossed the boundary from the one to the other: "the aggressiveness of the women singers is directly related to their position in Northern black [American] society in the years between the wars. In the main women were more able to get jobs than men, and for this reason found themselves in the position of family 'head'" (cited in Shepherd 1990: 171). The point here is that women felt they had to act like men in their music, since they were taking on a man's role in society. The one paralleled the other.

Many scholars see problems with these kinds of analysis. One is that it lumps all women together and all men together as opposites. There is no middle ground, of course, about age, religion, race..."
Chapter 3: The sociology of music

ground. or flexibility, and no consideration of other factors such as ethnicity, age, religion, or class. The result is a tendency towards what is called **essentialism**, where all people of a particular gender (or ethnicity, or class) are assumed to be the same, or where it is assumed that they ought to be the same. Sociology confronts this problem of typecasting all the time because it deals in the classification of types of people (that is what I was doing with my CD shop example).

Deciding how complex a form of classification is appropriate is one of the most difficult tasks the sociology of music faces. Its writers generally agree on the importance of social structures such as schools, family life, and the media in the shaping of group tastes (this is called enculturation or socialization). But they do not agree about how important those structures are and to what extent individuals resist or adapt them, thereby resisting easy pigeonholing. Another objection is that analyses in which music’s social meanings are seen as embedded actually give just a single snapshot, because different societies see the same music in different ways. Since societal values and traditions change, so music may be seen from a new angle and given new meanings. It is as though music is not a single, stable thing, but something that is constantly under construction. While new music is being produced all the time, older music also becomes “new.” At its most active, this process is known as **appropriation**: the claiming of something for one’s own group, possibly through reinterpreting its established social meaning or its symbolism. And that kind of reinterpretation can provoke a strong reaction from other groups who want to hear their music as they always used to, and see such change as an attempt to take it away from them.

The sociology of music, then, is not a single approach to music but a collection of different approaches, some of them conflicting with each other and many of them treading on the toes of other disciplines, including ethnomusicology, psychology, business history, gender studies, and communications research. The range is huge. Sociological method extends from detailed micro-studies of human interaction (within a pop band or a string quartet) to macro-studies of mass culture (where the essentialism problem is acute), or models in which the history of Western tonality, dominant from c.1580 to c.1905, parallels that of Western capitalism, unthreatened in its dominance during the same period. It brings together user surveys and discussions of the ways music is produced in the first place. It also digs deep into questions of money and power. And it deals, in various ways, with music, identity (how we see ourselves, and how others see us), and social meaning. Let us look in more detail at how some of those issues work in practice.

**The problem of “high art”**

I have deliberately left out one of the defining characteristics of the sociology of culture, music included: its oppositional nature. By this I mean that many
sociologists of culture define what they do by actively rejecting methods and attitudes that they see as problematic within the humanities. They see the study of literature, art history, and music history as suffering from the same problem: a tendency to concentrate on works of “high” art (“classical” music comes into this category) and to remove those works from their social context, seeing them simply as the product of genius. Many musicologists would see this description as an unfair caricature of what they do and what they teach. In fact, you can judge for yourself, as you read this book, how far apart you think these two traditions of thinking are. Nevertheless, the sense of high art’s “removal from the world” is often intentionally acute. You can feel it if you walk round a museum or sit in a hushed concert hall. There is often only artificial light, there will be as much soundproofing as possible, and minimal distraction from the works you are experiencing (when did you last see patterned wallpaper on a museum wall)?

Most of all, you will be an observer, not a participant. Touch the sculptures and you will be hissed at; sing along with a Mozart concerto and the same thing will happen. The first will come from employees; the second, from your fellow audience members, who now realize that you’re not one of them because you either don’t know the rules, or you refuse to obey them. There is, then, an etiquette to concert-going or museum-visiting, and it is a quasi-religious one. You are supposed to revere the vast majority of these works even though you might enjoy them, too. The moment you go in you are expected to conform, and if you do not want to conform or if you feel out of place more generally, you may find yourself deciding that the whole set of traditions, the art included, is not for you. (Box 3.2 shows another side of this question).

The reason so many museums and orchestras have outreach programs is to try to break down this kind of barrier. The aim is to reduce what is known as self-censorship—people turning away from an art form they might potentially enjoy because they are intimidated both by its rituals and by the kinds of people who are comfortable with those rituals.

These traditions form part of the cultural baggage of a key concept in the humanities that sociologists have always questioned: the autonomous artwork. This term sounds descriptive (the “independent work of art”) but is
also normative (i.e., it implies a system of values). Simply put, it expresses that idea that a work of art is the purely intellectual product of an unusually creative artistic mind (the genius-composer, for us). The work exists in our world, but its artistic quality makes it somehow other-worldly. It is distant from (and therefore more valuable than) musics that take account of what
ordinary people want to buy and to consume. It is unsullied by considerations of commerce, sexuality, or politics and (and here we are back to hermetically sealed concert halls) we are encouraged to value it for those very reasons. We are therefore asked to take it seriously, and to contemplate it. This mode of listening was so ingrained that when BBC public-service radio broadcasting took off in the 1920s, listeners were lectured on precisely how to use the new service. They were not to become passive listeners using music as background distraction, but to select their programs carefully and “to cultivate the art of using their wireless receivers intelligently and artistically” (BBC Handbook 1928, cited in Frith 1988: 28). Once freed from sitting in a concert hall, of course, audiences could use broadcast music as they liked (see above, Fig. 3.1): that was what the BBC feared.

Are geniuses made, not born?

At the heart of the idea lies a nineteenth-century concept – that of the genius composer who confounds us all with music we strain to understand, and whose struggles for recognition are successful because the quality of the music wins through in the end. The genius is a heroic figure. But what is a genius-composer, from a sociological point of view? Tia DeNora has researched this question in relation to one of the most famous “geniuses” of Western music: Beethoven. How, she asks, did Beethoven achieve success as a twenty-something composer looking for a freelance career in Vienna? What did it take to get him noticed and (put it crudely) to set him on the road to superstar composer? Can increasing recognition of the quality of his music be the only, or the main, reason? Her title, *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius*, gives the game away: her answer to that last question is “no.” Her subtitle, *Musical Politics in Vienna, 1792–1803* also hints at what she thinks of the idea of “autonomous artwork”; it does not exist as something independent of society. Beethoven’s works are not free-floating. They exist in the forms they do because they respond to many people’s needs, as part of a network of social relationships between Beethoven himself, his aristocratic patrons, publishers, concert promoters and theater directors, and music critics writing reviews for the local papers.

Those people are arranged in a hierarchy, with aristocratic patrons acting as what she calls “gatekeepers for public exposure” (DeNora 1995: 58). Access to good publishing contracts, concert appearances, and bread-and-butter teaching of the right kind of student depended on having one’s way “eased” by those in power. Composers who had the right connections did better in their careers and in their reputations after death than those who did not. DeNora is not denying Beethoven’s talent here. Nor is she saying that Beethoven acted in a mercenary fashion simply to keep patrons happy. She is simply using historical examples to show his advancement through the network beneath 1800, by comparison with music written by an unknown for Beethoven. Those associated with the hall are the main point of these various networks.

“Art and life”

DeNora’s research pathbreaking. Patrons were not just people who they paid but people who “intermediated on behalf of the agents, the makers of music” (p. 28). For men, as well as depots, patrimonial cities of speakers, it was the case of agents, et al. a band of brokers and the music industry with some overlap’.

Perhaps most revealing of all is this chapter’s conclusion: no one is more a musician than the music, and yet the music resembles
historical research to argue that social circumstance worked significantly to his advantage, and that Beethoven saw and successfully negotiated his way through the patronage system then in operation. Nevertheless, lurking beneath her study is another, more profound question, which she illustrates by comparing Beethoven’s career with that of a secondary composer whose music was similar in genre and style: Jan Ladislav Dussek. If we were to find an unknown Viennese composer of Beethoven’s age and to swap his life story for Beethoven’s, would we have heard the name Beethoven at all? And if Beethoven had been female, or black, what then? How secure, then, are those assumptions that the works that get into the museum or the concert hall are the “great” works? Like ethnomusicologists, sociologists of music find these very terms of reference problematic.

“Art worlds” and the music business

DeNora’s study has much in common with earlier work on art history. In a pathbreaking text called Art Worlds (1982), Howard Becker asked why painters were effectively regarded as the sole authors of their works when what they painted, and how it was received by the public, depended on so many intermediaries who could influence the outcome. Patrons, gallery owners, agents, auctioneers, the commissioners of paintings, and the manufacturers of paints—all were part of a complex production process, responding to and creating demand. Becker also saw those who looked at paintings as important kinds of “author,” and tried to strip away the mysterious quality of art, presenting it instead as something normal in which we can all, potentially, be involved. His vision of an “art world” can be applied to many kinds of music. For members of the audience, for instance, the impact of a rock concert is as dependent on the work of technical and lighting staff as it is on the capacities of the musicians themselves as songwriters and performers. And in the case of established bands there is, further “backstage,” a similar network of agents, administrators, and record promoters. All have a stake in the image a band presents, from clothing to stage design to the spatial choreography of the musicians themselves as they perform. Musical style is just one component of something much larger. There is more, then, to music, than just music.

Perhaps we think of opera primarily in terms of music, but if so, that is partly because of our enculturation, for exactly the same forces are at work (see chapter 8). We speak of Monteverdi’s Orfeo and Britten’s Peter Grimes as though no one else were involved. Even the librettist’s name (the person who wrote the text) will not make it onto the DVD front cover. Yet since sociologists see a musical work as taking on a real identity only when it reaches an audience, the number of “authors” expands massively. An operatic cast list begins to resemble a set of film credits. Producers, directors, conductors, translators,
designers, and technicians all contribute to the character of the final product. The practical side is no less important. Backstage, the Royal Opera House in London is a major employer of seamstresses, scene-painters, shoemakers, carpenters, rehearsal pianists, and the rest. As successive directors of the ROH have found, organizing the population of this miniature city to common artistic ends, and keeping the Board of Directors happy about the balance sheet, is no joke.

That brings us to money, which is an essential part of the network. Who funds music, and in what ways? What does the music market look like? Studying the financial mechanisms that underpin musical experience and influence choices allows us to see complex value systems at work. Governments, at local and national level, support certain types of music, both within education and beyond it; and not surprisingly, decisions as to how to spend public money are highly politicized. Many composers are supported through being salaried staff in universities. Private trusts and individual donors keep many musical institutions afloat; some are even officially registered as charities. All these modes of funding, however, presuppose the same thing: that music cannot look after itself in a market economy. Crucially for the sociology of music, that is true of some kinds of music but not others.

The recording industry reflects these differences. Within the major companies, a relatively recent trend has been to replace systems of cross-subsidy between divisions with those of individual profit centers. This has left relatively small, or niche, divisions such as jazz and classical music financially exposed: losses that were once cushioned by profits elsewhere become problematic when each and every division has to publish its accounts. One of the results, as Keith Negus explains, is that the shape of classical portfolios has expanded to include seasonal releases, “greatest hits” packages, and crossover (Negus 1999: 49-50), in the hope of attracting a wider audience to a loss-making category of music. The move looks similar to those outreach programs I mentioned earlier, in that part of its aim is to bypass the self-censorship among consumers who would not normally enter the classical section of a CD shop (that is why such CDs are marketed in supermarkets and garages). But it is more immediately dictated by financial, rather than educational, concerns (see also Chapter 16).

“Cultural capital,” social status, and identity

Sociological research by Richard Peterson and Albert Simkus dating from 1992 has provided detailed pictures of the relationships in America between class (measured according to nineteen occupational groupings) and musical taste. The results put Western classical music firmly at the top of the status hierarchy
(professionals, artists, managers) and country music equally firmly at the
bottom (caretakers, transport workers, farm laborers). Within each occu-
pational group, choices are inflected by ethnicity, but not really by gender. Even
in a globalized culture and a supposedly classless society, then, musical pre-
ference still indicates a lot about social identity and status.

In the light of my previous discussions about the recording industry we
might accordingly say that Western classical music lacks economic capital
but has plenty of "cultural capital." By this I mean, following the French
sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, that it is the most closely associated with ideas of
quality, refinement, and authority, and indicates a high level of class status.
Television advertisers have often used this equivalence to try to impress us
or to make us aspire to own a superior car or to choose a classy perfume.
Upmarket restaurant owners do it to make sure they attract the right kind
of clientele, second-guessing what social messages we are likely to pick up
in the music. This provides a more subtle example of the self-censorship
I mentioned earlier, since although some people are attracted, others are
persuaded to stay away. To a certain extent, one can "buy into" a partic-
ular class status by buying into the musical taste that goes with it. A
ticket or a donation becomes a cultural investment and an indication
of one's place in this particular social group. And the social ladder is often
made extraordinarily public, as in the donor lists published in the programs
for English National Opera (and other similar, institutions).

All this means, of course, that members of a socially dominant group (white
middle-class professionals in particular) are in a unique position to defend the
music they value (and which they consider to be a public good), and to insulate
it from the demands of the market. Hence, the kind of subsidy given out by the
Arts Council and other public bodies.

Statistical studies such as those of Peterson and Simkus can give us a broad-
brush view of the shape of the social organization of music. But smaller-
scale studies based on interviews and what ethnomusicologists call "participant
observation" are becoming increasingly popular as a means to get under the skin
of social attitudes. Their authors ask not just what people's views are, but why they
hold them. In respect of youth cultures and popular musics, some of the results
tell us a great deal about how central musical traditions are in cementing a sense
of individual and group identity as children reach adulthood. They also illustrate
the appropriation and reappropriation of musical values within different
and sexual difference were defined in terms of the petit bourgeois subcultures and the lower working class, and these were portrayed as more traditional, less modern, and more conservative than the middle class and the upper working class. These differences were often represented as a progression of the original hippie movement and its successors, which were associated with the counterculture and its subcultures. The hippie movement and its successors were seen as a reaction against the mainstream and the modern world. Some of these differences were also associated with the idea of an "urbanity" that was considered to be more authentic and real than the "mass" culture of the city. That is, the hipster movement was seen as a reaction against the commercialization of culture and the homogenization of the city. The hipster movement and its successors were seen as a way to escape from the mainstream and to find a more authentic and real experience of life.
and sexual discrimination. Black bouncers were sometimes used to implement anti-black "house policies," and some door policies operated on the basis of the assumed sexual preferences of groups turning up at the door.

Most importantly, though, Thornton diagnosed two sets of oppositional strategies at work among clubbers. One provided a reversal of the kind of live-music "authenticity" we saw with heavy metal, and which also exists in rock, jazz, and classical music. Clubbers turned this idea on its head, appropriating the sound of the record, and the artistry of the DJ, as the authentic root of the clubbing experience. The other strategy was more common: the opposition of an "us" and "them," of subculture and mainstream.

That mainstream was often dismissed as a form of mass music peddled by the record industry to the credulous. However, Thornton’s interviewees never defined it, and it became revealed as a second-hand concept that was, effectively, a necessary illusion that made membership of "the club" seem special and exclusive. Just like DeNora’s "genius," Thornton’s "mainstream" turned out to be a social construction invented from the inside. That does not make it less real as a sociological "fact," because people genuinely believed in it; it simply puts that "fact" into perspective.

Identity politics and the interplay of music and social status are the very stuff of the sociology of music, whatever type of music we study. And whereas music often appears sidelined in other kinds of interdisciplinary work within the arts and the humanities, it is central to sociological analysis because, as Bourdieu put it, it is the most deep-seated kind of taste we know, after that of food. And just as we feel physical revulsion at disgusting food (which others might consider a delicacy), so we react almost physically to music we dislike. It’s not a "take it or leave it" art form, and it surrounds and permeates our lives more than ever before. Sociology tries to make sense of what it means to us, and of what it says about us.

### Chapter summary

- Human beings invest music with value and meaning and use it as a way of defining themselves socially and binding themselves into groups.
• The sociology of music comprises several different (and sometimes mutually contradictory) ways of thinking about how music "means," establishing who consumes it, and explaining why different groups value different musical genres and styles.

• The sociology of music is often more concerned with people, politics, and social institutions than with the sounds of music itself. However, there is also a scholarly tradition which analyzes the sounds and structures of music in terms of the social elements they embody.

• Historically, the sociology of music has operated as a mode of musical study that opposes the idea - strongly associated with discussion of Western art music - of the autonomous artwork composed by the lone, transcendent, genius.

Discussion topics

• What assumptions about social groups and musical tastes do you think underlie the Daily Mail article in Box 3.2? How would you go about testing them out?

• What impressions do you get about musics and gender politics from this chapter? Try to work out why they do or do not surprise you.

• If sociology is able to identify instances of musical/social tension and to diagnose the reasons for them, do you think it should try to resolve them?

Further reading


