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Reviews

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Book review

***Music, Sound and Space. Transformations of Public and Private Experience*
Edited by Georgina Born, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
2013, 358 p.**

Reading a book like this, one cannot fail to be impressed by the scale and ambition of the undertaking. As the title suggests, its purpose is to link music, sound and space by revealing the transformations in public and private experience. Though music is central to this book, it is certainly not restricted to the art world or concert halls. On the contrary, the aim is to open up the world of music by testing it against many fields of knowledge, questioning and investigation. Just looking through the table of contents makes one realise the large number of subjects studied: the history of sound installations, new technologies for listening to music, broadcasting of background music in the workplace, the soundscape of a hospital or an Islamic village, the use of sound in healing or in war, among others. In a way *Music, Sound and Space* sets out to take stock of the consequences of technology's growing involvement in the production of contemporary sound spaces, and to reveal the various sound forces shaping social life. We are at a crossroads between many approaches, ranging from musicology to sound studies, anthropology to cultural studies, aesthetics and music to media studies. Quite clearly this book contributes to breaking down two types of barriers: the separations between the social sciences and humanities, and the partitions within the world of music itself. It is in fact the fruit of an interdisciplinary conference held in 2008 at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities at Cambridge University.

The reader is soon struck by three main ideas.

Firstly, the field of music brings into play extremely varied modes of existence and increasingly tends to be confused with the world of sound. In a way, the book prompts debate on the contemporary world, starting with all that is audible.

Secondly, music now seems to impregnate all social activities and the many spheres of daily life. It is as if we were witnessing a widespread drive to set the world to music and/or give it a soundtrack, reconfiguring the very basis of our existing forms of sociability and spatiality.

Thirdly, the world of sounds and music raises major sociopolitical issues, particularly with regard to the public space. The book opens the way for a critical phenomenology of the sound world, taking into account the many dimensions – cultural, historic, material, social, spatial, aesthetic and subjective – of present-day experience.

Presented in this way, one might feel disheartened by the scale of the task or confused by the many areas of study. There is also the risk of missing the full depth and diversity of analysis and failing to grasp the relevance of the questions raised. The book is certainly alive with new ideas, arguments and theoretical references, opening onto a wide variety of fields and types of investigation, but it is nevertheless accessible both in terms of form and content. In formal terms the articles are divided into four main groups, helping readers to keep their bearings and revealing very clearly the connections made in the book in a self-explanatory manner: ‘The design of mediated music and sound’ (1), ‘Space, sound and affect in everyday life-worlds’ (2), ‘Music, identity, alterity and the politics of space’ (3), ‘Music and sound: torture, healing and love’ (4). Music operates here as the key term around which the various parts and the fields of investigation are organised. This is supplemented by a very comprehensive pluridisciplinary bibliography, the references of recordings of all the music mentioned and a particularly welcome index.

But it is the introduction which undoubtedly contains the most explicit, substantiated keys to understanding the overall project, the aim of which is nothing less than to contribute to the emergence of a sonic-social phenomenology. The initial article by Georgina Born is a whole research programme in itself, offering a panoramic view of the questions and positions which underpin the work. Not only does this article present each subsequent item in detail, backed by well-informed analysis, but it also deploys a theoretical and epistemological toolbox of great relevance and topicality. Six terms serve as points of reference here, the idea being to combine or problematise them in their mutual relations: music, sound, space, time, subjectivity and sociality. One of the main movements in this introductory article thus involves making links and finding ways of articulating these terms, building assemblies and drawing dynamic constellations. One passage seems to sum up the overall position and thrust particularly well: ‘The framework amounts to an anti-metaphysical, non-essentialising, empirical analytics of the diverse and changing forms of the social mediation of music and sound; and it permits us to discern such differences without succumbing to a tragic metaphysics of musical co-presence and its loss, or a dualism that valorises the aurally authentic over what is deemed to be artificial or secondary’ (pp. 32-33). A book of this sort really justifies its existence by introducing the social (sociopolitical) dimension into the articulation between music, sound and space.

The book may certainly be read on two levels. On the one hand, taken as a whole, this collection of articles provides a very broad panoramic view of the many forms of expression to which the field of sound and music lends itself. In this respect it is symptomatic of the expansion of this field – combining sound studies, soundscape studies, auditory culture and musical studies – which is open to a wide range of influences and perhaps in search of its own identity. Although it is discussed at length, the distinction between music and sound remains problematic, and in the end it is not entirely clear whether it should be kept or discarded (the two words are often used in conjunction). On the other hand, taken separately, each article is theoretically ambitious, while pulling together – each in its own way – the overall thrust of the book. The pieces based on detailed field investigations are certainly the most interesting, revealing new subjects of study and raising particularly stimulating, original questions. They rise above the other sections which take such a broad view as to be too general to cope with the changes in contemporary life.

Ultimately, reading a book like this – over and above the diversity of the questions and fields it addresses – one can see several recurrent force lines running through these articles. Study of the sound world prompts the authors to propose new concepts and to display considerable conceptual creativity. For example, terms such as ‘panaudic’ and ‘sonic incontinence’ are illustrations of the terminological invention, the development of new categories required by research of this sort. Moreover, raising questions about sounds calls into question some separations and distinctions which are much too clear-cut. Various forms of porosity and permeability are clearly identified and brought to light, between self and collectivity, inner and outer, corporeal and psychic, space and body, public and private. Lastly, such attention to the field of sound also impacts on the way we think about space, power, the body or the city. These fields take on a wholly different appearance once we address them from a sound perspective. Among the prime merits of this book is the fine use it makes of the heuristic power of sound.