

## Book review

Beata M. Kowalczyk

### **Transnational Musicians. Precariousness, Ethnicity and Gender in the Creative Industry**

Routledge, London and New York, 2021, ISBN 978-0-367-41850-2, 192 pages, £ 36.99 (Paperback) and £ 33.29 (eBook).

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Closing her work on the construction of a sociology of the arts, Zolberg (1990: 214) encouraged scholars to contextualise their research by 'paying attention to micro and macro-levels of society, considering structure and agency' and to '[encompass] cultural values as well as material interests'. This advice is carefully followed by Beata Kowalczyk in a book exploring the socially constructed nature of transnational careers in the creative industries through the case of Japanese classical musicians. The introduction and the first chapter illustrate the complex social architecture within which Japanese classical musicians aiming to have a transnational career juggle 'to reconcile the irreconcilable' (p.152): their ethnic identity and their professional identity. The following six chapters analyse this agency-structure relationship drawing on a variety of material including documental analysis, semi-structured interviews with seventy-five Japanese classical musicians, quantitative data derived from secondary sources, exchanges with experts in the sector, and contextual observations. At the end of each chapter a useful summary outlines the main findings.

In what follows I will focus on the core issues of Kowalczyk's research: the social construction of art worlds; the effect of national policies on the regulation of artistic labour markets; the cultural asymmetries present in the global hierarchy of artistic values; and the criticism of the creative industries approach. With regards the first issue, the author details the double-sided nature of the problematic relationship between Asian national cultures and the art world of classical music. The latter is found to be reluctant to acknowledge the elitist, gendered and racialised nature of its ideological foundations, thereby upholding Western cultural supremacy (Weber 1992). This leads to discriminatory practices towards musicians not reflecting the normative ideals (such as whiteness and maleness) hidden behind myths of authenticity and aesthetical uniformity (Ostleitner 1995, DeNora 1995). When recalling their need to 'go West' in search of an 'authentic' experience of classical music, or the belief that their body is considered unfit for the canonical classical music repertoire, the Japanese musicians interviewed by Kowalczyk seem to have interiorized the canonical tenets of the classical music world. In their home country, however, classic music was historically conceived as an imported cultural product, never fully embedded in society, and policy makers were reluctant to include it within state-subsidised cultural productions. A further hurdle in the career-building of Japanese musicians is the persistent influence of traditional gender roles in society: classical music education is mainly afforded to women who, however, are reminded to put family before their career plans, and to uphold their caregiver role. Men, on the contrary, are discouraged from engaging in feminine practices and pursuing a profession incompatible with the role of breadwinner.

The scarce working opportunities present in Japan for classical musicians, the requirements of the classical music world for an 'authentic' training experience in Europe, and the pressures of national societal constraints are the basis of the transnational mobility projects made by Japanese classical musicians. Building upon a theoretical approach conceiving artists as workers (Becker 1982), Kowalczyk compares the migration experiences of her interviewees in France and Poland in light of the national formal settings influencing their career building, both as classical musicians and as migrants. While in France foreign classical musicians may benefit from the government's active support for the cultural sector, including subsidies for productions creating work opportunities for artists and a legal system protecting them from the risks of precariousness, in Poland they see their working opportunities restrained by the scarce support of the government for the cultural sector, mostly concentrated in big cities, and by strict migration laws.

Both in the French and Polish labour market, however, Japanese musicians recurrently experienced ethnic and racial discrimination, and the undervaluing of Asian candidates in favour of 'local' ones. Drawing on Michael Herzfeld's (2004) concept of 'global hierarchy of value', the author relates those experience to the inferior position assigned to Japanese classical music production in the global music order. This mechanism allows for the economic exploitation of Japanese music students who pursue an 'authentic' training in classical music by enrolling in Western institutions for higher music education. The same logic, however, marginalises Japanese

classical musicians in the music industry, where the global hierarchy of value is maintained and reproduced through marketing strategies.

This brings the author to the core issue of the book: the relationship between persistent inequalities in the classical music profession and the neoliberalisation of the creative industries through deregulation and liberalisation policies in the post-industrial era. Strongly associated with the attention given by British governments to the development potential offered by national youth culture in the mid-nineties (achieving international acclaim under the 'Cool Britannia' label), this approach was later followed by the 'Cool Japan' campaign, 'supplementing Japan's image as a modern, developed country with that of an exoticized, traditional part of the old Orient, in order to attract foreign tourists' (p.17). Adopting a critical stance to this approach (Bank and Hesmondhalgh 2009), Kowalczyk notes how the emphasis it places on the role of individual skills and talents as potential boosters for job creation and collective wealth hides the structural nature of problems underlying precarious labour conditions and the discriminative practices normalised within creative labour markets.

Kowalczyk identifies the main strategies adopted by her interviewees to uphold a transnational career: social capital resources gained through the networks musicians accessed during periods of study in Europe; the economic or legal condition of spouses; and the possibility to find alternative sources of income (more often teaching music, in the case of pianists, or becoming orchestra members, in the case of string players). Regrettably, scarce attention is paid to the role of interviewees' social characteristics in hampering or facilitating the acquisition of those resources. For instance, although the majority of musicians interviewed were women and pianists (3/4 of the sample, for both the categories) a comparative view on the relationship between their social characteristics and their access to and permanence in the classical music world is missing. This seems related to a methodological limitation scrupulously acknowledged by the author: interviews were realised in Japanese language by a foreigner and non-musician researcher, aware of the limited confidence and trust deriving from one-time encounters: 'Issues that I felt could be considered offensive or potentially uncomfortable, especially matters concerning finances, class origins or family matters (...) were skipped altogether unless raised voluntarily by my interviewees' (p. 36). Overall, the book represents a well-informed and challenging contribution to those debates exploring the multi-layered and intersectional nature of inequalities in artistic worlds, significantly affecting artists' personal and professional lives.

## References

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