Mavericks and Other Traditions in American Music

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race, difference, and power at various historical junctures. European and Euro-American reception of African and African-American-generated sound, music, and rhythm constructed black music variously as confirmation of African difference, “African diasporic humanity,” racial and sexual threats to European civilization, and later, evidence of spiritual transcendence and cultural wholeness.

Building on historical findings about the everyday forms of interracial contact in the antebellum South, Radano explores how slave songs, works by African-American musicians at country dances, and sacred songs performed in the context of Christian revival meetings infused black music with complex, even contradictory information about racial difference. Such interracial musical encounters and conclusions about African-American musical talent and humanity vied with powerful competing socio-musical claims, namely the “modern European musical conceptions of others” in which black sound and music necessarily occupied a subordinate position.

This book offers stimulating readings of texts on music and race that supplement the extraordinarily rich body of work on African-American social and cultural history and the forms and localities of racial formation in the United States. Beyond its interdisciplinary scope and critical energy, its most valuable contribution for historians most likely lies in its carefully theorized, compellingly argued, and richly documented analysis of music as a site of social and cultural contestation. As historians increasingly seek to incorporate music into their work, Radano’s clear, incisive modeling of “music” as a performative, textual, and social phenomenon that must be interrogated historically rather than essentialized is particularly welcome.

As accomplished a work as this is, however, a curious silence haunts it. Although Radano takes pains to recover evidence that can clarify how the study of black music offers fresh vistas on the racialized “partiality of American society,” he gives only cursory attention to the implications of the repeated conflation of black music and male bodies in his sources. The lack of critical discussion of where African and Euro-American female music makers or audiences fit in the history of black music limits the depth of understanding that this book can provide concerning black music’s interrelationship with the history of gender, sexuality, and women’s place. Why should European, Euro-American, and African-American evaluators find black music synonymous with male bodies, voices, texts? How might the erasure of African, African-American, or Euro-American female contributions to the production or consumption of black music from the historical record further the social and cultural work that elite interpretation of black music performed (e.g. measuring humanity, registering difference, discovering “hot” rhythm)? Such an omission is perplexing given the extensive work on such questions in cultural history and cultural studies of music. Further research into these dimensions of the discursive properties of black music across time and space is still needed to sharpen our understanding of music making, race, and individual and national identity formation.

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Michael Broyles. Mavericks and Other Traditions in American Music. New Haven: Yale University Press. 2004. Pp. 387. $40.00. Michael Broyles’s ambitious and stimulating study traces the history of American musical mavericks: creative visionaries who, by choice or circumstance, largely resided outside of the musical and cultural mainstream. The eighteenth-century hymn composer William Billings and the antebellum symphonist Anthony Philip Heinrich, Broyles shows, were mavericks largely by circumstance, isolated by the lack of viable musical networks in the early United States. After the mid-nineteenth century, commercial song publishing, the musical stage, and above all German-trained classical composers created such networks, and now mavericks were those who defined themselves in opposition to this status quo. The young Leo Ornstein’s pianistic modernism guaranteed him only a brief vogue in the 1910s, while for decades Charles Ives pursued a career in insurance, scorned musical professionals, and composed dissonant works in isolation. In 1922 modernist composers began to organize their own societies, publications, and concerts. Carl Ruggles, Charles Seeger, and Henry Cowell paved the way for striking iconoclasts such as John Cage and Harry Partch. Shifting post-World War II orthodoxies in art music— involving twelve-tone serialism, free atonality, and minimalism—then led new nonconformists, such as Frank Zappa and Meredith Monk, to carve out startling compositional and performative identities.

Broyles’s work partially retraces familiar territory. Magisterial music histories by H. Wiley Hitchcock, Gilbert Chase, Charles Hamm, and others all discuss these composers (at least through Partch) and trace a tradition of rugged individualism. Broyles’s initial chapters on Billings and Heinrich, while engaging and substantive, add little to what we already know and mostly provide an extended prologue to the rest of the book. Alleged maverick traditions since the Civil War, however, receive nuanced and innovative treatments, and Broyles’s sensitivity to the sociological complexities of the maverick phenomenon becomes evident. He asks early in his study, “to what extent are the mavericks a historical, cultural, or mythic creation of publicity, their own or others” and “to what extent are they the result of a filtering process that occurs somewhere in our collective consciousness, by which we glorify, transform, and in some cases re-create our artists to fit our perceptions or our fantasies?” (p. 2). Americans’ own construction of the maverick tradition proves critical. Broyles brilliantly shows how, after World War II, Cage exploited sophisticated audiences’ yearning for a particular brand of folksy, irascible, orientalist
iconoclasm, while serialists such as Milton Babbitt
gained academic cachet by tapping into an acute faith
in scientific progress. Similarly, in the twentieth cen-
tury Billings and Heinrich were rescued from oblivion
by musicologists seeking the origins of American mu-
sical maverickdom. Broyles concludes the Americans’
persistent construction of a musical maverick tradition
reflected their adherence to myths of individualism,
which successfully diverted them from deeper (and
more problematic) traditions of community identity.

The analytical final section of Broyles’s book, “The
Legacy of the Mavericks,” circles back to his main
subjects and explores the intellectual and cultural
trends that defined them as mavericks. Broyles identi-
fies signs of decay in the tradition and its construction
beginning in the 1960s, as his inspired inclusion of
Zappa especially shows. An autodidact who only slowly
mastered rock guitar playing (ostensibly his primary
musical skill) and who was sketchily instructed in
composition, Zappa used vulgar theatrics aimed at
teen audiences to gape toward a tightly controlled
performance art that increasingly succeeded at rein-
vigorating the fundamental vitality of the musical stage
experience. Alternatively Monk, like Cage and Parch,
has battled Western music’s emphases on rationality
and science but gone beyond them by rejecting all
instruments but the human voice. Monk encourages
Broyles to end his study with an optimistic paean to
contemporary redefinitions (or deconstructions) of the
idea of music itself—a celebration that seems to
rekindle the idea that an actual, valid maverick tradi-
tion is still at work.

The curiously miscellaneous reference in Broyles’s
title to “other traditions” suggests that his tracing of
maverickdom—as a tradition and as a cultural con-
struction—should be construed only as a tentative
initial investigation, designed to encourage more
sweeping future reinterpretations of American music
history. Scholars likely will want to go beyond his
exclusive focus on European-American composers in a
nation rich with African-American, Latino, Asian
American, and Native American musicians (many of
whom were also definitely mavericks). America’s mu-
sical cultures also long made female creators de facto
mavericks, composing in rooms of their own; Broyles
only briefly touches on their experiences. The subtle-
ties of identity politics in the United States militate
against broad assertions about maverickdom. For
example, while Broyles rightly considers Aaron Copland
a mainstream composer and makes him a minor figure
in his book, in certain contexts his Jewishness, his
homosexuality, and his populism made him a maverick,
if only temporarily. While we await further investiga-
tions, though, we can enjoy and profit from Broyles’s
scrupulous and elegantly written reinterpretation of a
major current in the history of American music.

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A common experience for European visitors in the
United States—one that Arnaldo Testi aptly recalls in
his remarkable book—is that of marveling at the
insistence with which the American flag is displayed
almost everywhere and on every occasion. The reac-
tion is usually a mixed one, of surprise, perplexity, even
embarrassment, and sometimes annoyance, national
flags being to Europeans, independently of one’s own
political stance, clear symbols of patriotism if not
outright chauvinism. But, as often happens in this field,
things are rather more complicated, especially as far as
the relationship between American culture and the
“Stars and Stripes” is concerned. And this book,
written by an outstanding Italian scholar well-known
both in Europe and in the United States, is a very useful
tool for anyone who is interested in knowing more
about that relationship. Of course, one may wonder
(and I myself feel inclined to do so) if this is not yet
another form of “American exceptionalism”: every
aspect of the American national life becoming a sort of
peculiar experience, to be separately and differently
approached, encapsulated, studied, and explained. It
may or may not be so. But one thing is certain: the
metaphorical density of so many phenomena that
involve American culture (and above all American
material culture) and the way in which they become
(and define themselves as) impressive symbols, within
and without the United States, are matters of study as
well as of wonder.

The end result of a post-September 11 university
course in Italy (and the expanded version of a previous
article), this book explores the many ways in which that
relationship has manifested itself since the Revolu-
tionary War—and the many faces that the national
symbol took on during more than two and a half
centuries. At the very beginning of his book, Testi
writes that “the American flag born during the Ameri-
can revolution accompanied the manifold develop-
ments which followed it, and was itself a cultural
terrain of dispute and confrontation. Whatever it
represents, the ‘Stars and Stripes’ is a bloodthirsty
totem” (p. 13).

One is then led through the various stages both of
the process through which a definite (tangible) “form”
of flag was designed and finally accepted (a dialectical
process too often neglected, and which contains many
interesting implications) and of the varying meanings
(positive/negative) that the “flag as metaphor” has
assumed ever since in different historical, social, and
cultural situations and contexts (the postrevolutionary
period, the Civil War, the turn-of-the-century years,
World War I and its aftermath, World War II and the
following decades, until our own times). In the 140
pages of this small-format book, the history of the flag
as object and metaphor is followed in all its relation-
ships to politics, everyday life, culture, and literature.

Testi’s book has many strong points and a minor