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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

In *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology*, Joseph Kerman observes that:

What I would call serious criticism – academic music criticism, if you prefer – does not exist as a discipline on a par with musicology and music theory on the one hand, or literary and art criticism on the other . . . In the circumstances it is idle to complain or lament that critical thought in music lags conceptually far behind that in other art. In fact, nearly all musical thinkers travel at a respectful distance behind the latest chariots (or bandwagons) of intellectual life in general . . . Semiotics, hermeneutics, and phenomenology are being drawn upon only by some of the boldest of musical studies today. Post-structuralism, deconstruction and serious feminism have yet to make their debuts in musicology or music theory. (Kerman 1985: 17)

This special issue of the *Canadian University Music Review* on *Alternative Musicologies (Les Musicologies Alternatives)* is intended as a contribution to filling that gap. All the papers published here are by scholars invited to an Occasional Conference on “Alternative Musicologies” organised and hosted by the Department of Music at Carleton University in March, 1988. I would like to thank Dr. D.J. Brown, Vice-President (Planning and Development), Carleton University, the British Council, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for the funding which made this Conference possible. Line Grenier would also like to thank the latter Council for the financial support (in the form of doctoral and post-doctoral fellowships) which made possible the work reported in her contribution to this volume.

It is one thing to state a wish for disciplinary reform. It is another to live with its consequences. As Susan McClary indicates in the paper which opens this volume: “Recent statements by scholars such as Joseph Kerman make it seem that on the one hand musicology is eager to have instances of feminist criticism; but, on the other hand, the discipline is apprehensive about how far the critique would go and about the consequences with respect to the canon.” McClary’s paper demonstrates that a feminist musicology is not simply about adding the names of women composers to the established canon, and continuing to explore the established canon in conventional ways. A feminist musicology, she argues, inevitably opens up for discussion the make-up of the canon and how the canon could and should be studied. The canon is established overwhelmingly by men, comprised overwhelmingly by men, and studied in ways which replicate dominant forms of male hegemony.

Carol Flinn, in her contribution to this volume, gives us an example of feminist musical criticism in respect of film music, an area sadly neglected

by both music and film scholars. Her analysis is of the score of *Detour*, a 1945 film noir. What both McClary's and Flinn's work points to is that music occupies a particular location in our society. The very hegemonic processes which lead to music being studied in the ways in which it conventionally is result also in it being situated in a 'feminised' location: it is a 'subjective other' to a world, to use McClary's language, that is constituted hegemonically by "the orderly, the rational, the cerebral." It must therefore be carefully managed: excluded from or marginalised within academic study if it celebrates or speaks to the corporeal, the social; studied as if it were an object isolated from corporeal and social processes if it is that kind of music which itself, in its manner of conception, performance, articulation and reception, plays down as far as is possible the corporeal and the social.

A feminist critique therefore strikes at the heart of what is wrong with what we traditionally study in university music departments, and how we conventionally study it. It points to the need to study music as a thorough-going social phenomenon. That is why, although a feminist critique strikes at the heart of the musicological malaise, it raises issues that stretch far beyond the arena of gender alone, or feminist analyses of that arena. It is for that reason, as McClary observes, that feminists "cannot afford to focus solely on obvious instances of gender — to be one-issue critics." They "must also be alert to the politics of race, of class, of subjectivity, of popular culture: those elements that traditionally have been relegated to the 'feminine' slagheap."

These elements are ones that inevitably beckon the social sciences into musicological enquiry. It is no accident, therefore, that in this volume Line Grenier argues as follows. It is time, she says, that "social scientists, sociologists in particular, stopped evading the issue of music, put an end to reducing musical issues to mere empirical questions, and ceased turning towards musicologists for answers to questions which, I would argue, are in some measure sociological ones." In the same vein, Simon Frith, in his contribution to this volume, states that "rather than agreeing, then, as a sociologist, that, of course, musicologists understand music and I do not . . . I want to suggest that, in fact, sociologists can make their own contribution to the analysis of musical meaning and value." This, for many musicologists, is the sticking point. As Grenier explains, established musicological views on what is musical about music:

do not deny the fact that music has, indeed, something to do with culture and society. However, they tend to assert that 'music itself' can be defined without any further reference to social or cultural dimensions. Accordingly, it is assumed that the specificity of music lies exclusively in its sonic materiality . . . as well as in its aesthetic, if not formal, nature.

To suggest that music is *intrinsically* social in its sonic, aesthetic and formal constitution is thus to utter the ultimate heresy. While, therefore, Kerman seems to welcome critical approaches, shot through as they are with the principles of social scientific enquiry, to the study of music, he is much less certain about the social sciences themselves:

The traditional alliance of musicology has been with the humanistic disciplines, not with the social sciences . . . This alliance is still the best for developing a conceptual framework for Western music. . . It is one thing . . . to draw on modern historiography, with its ample provision for insights from anthropology and sociology, and quite another to draw on those disciplines directly for an understanding of Western music. (Kerman 1985: 174–5)

By “Western” music, of course, Kerman means music of the established canon.

A genuine and valid concern of musicologists is that, if music is approached as a phenomenon or process that *is* intrinsically social in its sonic, aesthetic and formal constitution, then it will, in some way, surrender its very musicality. This is a concern met head on by Grenier. In her opinion, sociology’s contribution to the study of music “should consist in bringing forth a definition of music as a *fully-fledged social phenomenon*, one that would not only grasp its constitutive social dimensions, its various historical forms and dimensions, *but also recognize and account for its very specificity*” (second set of italics mine). As well as being critical of conventional musicological (*and* some social scientific) wisdoms concerning the musicality of music, Grenier criticises many approaches to music as culture as effectively, although seldom intentionally, draining music of its specific qualities. She argues for a generic approach to conceptualising music as a social and cultural phenomenon, an approach which understands that “while musical structures should not be considered as meaningful in themselves, musical symbolism should not be reduced to a purely arbitrary or any other form of ‘conventional’ signification.” My own contribution shares similar concerns to those of Grenier. I argue that the central preoccupation of the academic study of music should be with the precise qualities and characteristics of music’s sociality. That sociality should, however, be conceived as a specifically *musical* sociality. In making that case I take to its limits the idea that the sounds of music are heavily implicated in, although *not* determining of, the constitution of this sociality.

My concerns are primarily those of a musicologist. In contemplating music’s “sociality” I am inevitably drawn to, if not entranced by, the examination of the non-linguistic use of sound in music’s signifying processes. The academic orientation of Jean-Jacques Nattiez is primarily musicological, although, of course, Nattiez’s scholarship has developed along lines

significantly different to that of Grenier and myself. Over the years Nattiez has made an invaluable contribution to musical scholarship by exploring (*inter alia*) the extent to which semiological and structuralist concepts can be usefully and fertily applied to the analysis of music. This contribution has been recognized recently by Nattiez's election to the Royal Society of Canada, the award of a Killam Fellowship (the most prestigious fellowship in Canada open to competition), and the award of the Dent Medal by the Royal Musical Association of Great Britain. In his contribution to this volume Nattiez explores the extent to which concepts of narrativity can legitimately be applied to the analysis of music.

A preoccupation with musicological concerns alone is, however, unlikely to lead to a full understanding of signifying processes in those forms of music (the majority in this world) which do not draw an almost exclusive attention to their use of "abstract sound". Indeed, as Frith points out, the application of *traditional* musicological concerns to the study of popular music in particular can be downright misleading, although it is perhaps only fair to point out that there have been musicological approaches to the study of popular music in recent years which are anything but traditional. "Our reception of music," says Frith, "our expectations from it, are not inherent in the music itself — which is one reason why so much musicological analysis of popular music misses the point: its object of study, the discursive text it constructs, is not the text to which anyone listens." Frith's paper is a review of the everyday, discursive textuality that people construct in response to the music they use, a textuality which, as a consequence, not only informs the meanings that people invest in and take from music, but very largely constitutes them. The dominant discursive formations within which music is embedded are those constructed around the contested sites of the "classical", the "folk" and the "popular". These contestations, argues Frith, demonstrate that such formations cannot be regarded as exclusive. "My own feeling," he says, "is that . . . comparative sociology would reveal far less clear distinctions between these worlds than their discursive values imply." If we do not take value in music as somehow measurable in terms of given, unquestionable, and objective criteria — if what people value in music is somehow located within these fractious formations — then, as Frith concludes, "if the meaning of 'good music' is so unstable how can we possibly assign it to the notes alone?"

The discursive spaces revealed by the first six contributions to this volume have been entered to a significant degree by ethnomusicology and popular music studies, both fields which have been marginalised if not excluded by the musical academy. The last two pieces in this collection are representative of this occupation. They both explore, in quite different ways, the manner in which individual people "get into music" within a full and complex social context. The link between "alternative musicologies" and this kind of

analysis is quite explicit for Steven Feld. For Steven Feld, “les musicologies alternatives doivent comprendre les discours sur la musique qui, dans le langage de la musicologie, sont laissés de côté ou considérés comme tabous.” Feld’s purpose is:

de rappeler la parenté intime qui existe entre les puissances libératrices de la musicologie alternative et de l’ethnomusicologie, un domaine qui lutte encore pour sa reconnaissance au sein d’une académie musicale imbue de nostalgie myope et d’un désir de séparer les musiques d’“art” élitistes de toutes les autres formes d’invention musicale humaine.

To this end, his paper is offered “à la fois comme critique du discours musicologique dominant sur ‘l’analyse stylistique’ et comme évocation d’une musicologie alternative du style: le style imaginé et pratiqué par le peuple Kaluli de la Nouvelle-Guinée papoue.” Feld’s exploration of style is replete with references to the kind of discourses invoked by Frith. For Feld style is the “groove.” For the Kaluli, the “groove” is constituted through complex aesthetic matrices of sounds, both “musical” and “natural,” which speak to individual Kaluli, to Kaluli in collectivities and to the natural environment of forest, water and birds in which the Kaluli live. For the Kaluli, the “groove” is “lift-up-over-sounding” or “*dulugu ganalan*.” It is always in motion, a process rather than an object.

Wicke’s paper is also replete with references to the kind of discourses invoked by Frith. However, it is also replete with the concern for the centrality of sound to music evidenced by Feld. Wicke’s paper provides a suitable conclusion to this volume for two reasons. Firstly, as a musicologist, Wicke offers a powerful yet subtle and flexible theory for the *place* and *role* of sound (“music”?) in rock music in facilitating the construction and articulation of meaning from and within a complex social context. Yet, secondly, he offers no theory for the precise *mechanisms* through which the sound (“music”?) acts as a *medium* in and through which meaning can be located and constructed. Wicke demonstrates that Frith’s misgivings about traditional musicological concerns are well taken. Rock songs cannot be regarded as art objects, objects constituted exclusively through the non-linguistic use of sound. A rock song for Wicke provides a series of moments in a musical flow (which can extend both before and after “the song”) in and through which listeners can construct their own, specific and unique meanings by reference to fragmented moments within several, distinct and separate “non-musical” communication networks within which the song is differentially inserted, but which cannot constitute the song as a coherent formation, as an object. And that is putting it simply! The sophistication of

Wicke's work is made possible by a certain potential within the German language for a level of theoretical conceptualisation not easily replicated in English. This not only means that the paper was difficult to translate. It means also that it will probably bear more than one reading.

A difference between Feld's and Wicke's papers is that Feld gets heavily into the material of sound, something it is possible to do when examining a specific body of music. Wicke, however, is offering a theorisation of a genre, and a broad one at that. The vacuum left by sound, by an understanding of the mechanism through which sound is in relation to the discourses and meanings invested in it presents, in Wicke's view, a challenge, a challenge "which it is more urgent than ever to meet." The reason for this challenge is clear. We talk about "music." But do we, as musicologists, really know what we are talking about? It is one thing to talk about sounds as physical phenomena. It is quite another to talk about "music" as a cultural phenomenon. If the Kaluli make little or no distinction between the musicality of what we would regard as "musical" and "natural" sounds, and if Wicke leaves vacant the nodal point of his model, then perhaps we should take note of Grenier, the sociologist's, warning about "the highly polysemic nature of the term 'music'" and about the way in which "the notion encompasses distinct concepts." In trying to understand music we should, in fact, be concerned with understanding specific, complexly interlinked processes of signification in which the non-linguistic use of sound is implicated. If we want to understand what is meant by "music," then we are concerning ourselves with understanding the processes through which a signifier ("music") acts as a site for the investment of different and, quite possibly, incommensurable and competing meanings. It is necessary to keep these issues distinct, but not to forget that they are powerfully and significantly linked, a point made by Richard Middleton in his discussion of the question of the definition of popular music:

If we do not try to grasp the relations between popular music discourses and the material musical practices to which they refer, and at the same time the necessary distinctness of level between these, we are unlikely to break through the structures of power which, as Foucault makes clear, discursive authority erects. (Middleton 1990: 7)

It is fitting, perhaps, that the collection should end with a paper by a popular music scholar. Half the contributors to this issue have played prominent roles in the International Association for the Study of Popular Music, an organisation that will celebrate its tenth anniversary in 1991. The organisation is founded upon principles of interdisciplinarity and of breaking

down the barriers that Russell Jacoby has recently and so eloquently identified (Jacoby 1987) as existing between the academy and the world of public culture. But, as Philip Tagg so rightly commented in the closing session of the Association's Third International Conference in Montreal in 1985, in what way do these principles make the study of popular music different to the study of any other kind of music? It is not that popular music or popular music studies are something apart, something different. If the truth of the matter is, as I have commented elsewhere, that — while “some of the most interesting work on the subject of music as a signifying practice within human communities has come from ethnomusicologists” (Shepherd 1990: 29) — it is within popular music studies that the tension between context and text has been “more inescapably and sharply focussed than it has been in musicology or ethnomusicology” (*Ibid*: 15), then it may be from within popular music studies that some future directions for musicology will emerge. But this, as Grenier has intimated, is not a one-sided affair. If musicologists need to pull up their socks, then so do sociologists and cultural theorists. And if popular music studies can provide the broad platform on which this mutual pulling up of socks can occur, then it must be recognized that there is a long way to go. The project, however, is an exciting one, as Middleton suggests:

. . . despite encouraging developments in recent years, the study of popular music has hardly got underway. Traditional musicology still largely banishes popular music from view because of its ‘cheapness’, while the relatively new field of cultural studies neglects it because of the forbiddingly special character of music. A breakthrough in popular music studies would, in my view, reorientate cultural studies in a fundamental way and would completely restructure the field of musicology. (Middleton 1990: v)

The production of this volume has been very much a collective affair. I am indebted to Marcelle Guertin, Jocelyne Guilbault, Nicole Beaudry, Sylvie Roulx, Regina Datta, Ernst Oppenheimer and Peter Wicke for their work in translating three of the papers which appear here. I would like to thank Jean Brearley, the Editorial Assistant of Carleton University's Centre for Research on Culture and Society, who did much of the initial word processing on the English-language papers. Finally, I am greatly indebted to Marcelle Guertin for her work in editing the French-language articles which appear here.

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