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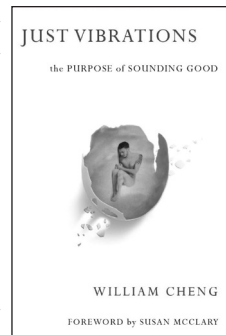
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*Just Vibrations: The Purpose of Sounding Good* is an engaging and wide-ranging read that reflects upon the personal and professional lives of academics and challenges the reader to consider whether their work does good. Cheng's text is part of a growing body of literature that asks what role disciplinary work plays in relating to and caring for others. The audience for this book is wide, as the author envisions "musicology as all the activities, care, and caregiving of people who identify as members of the musicology community" (7). The word *just* in "just vibrations" is used as "merely" and as "good," setting up his main argument that music and musicology should aim to do good by caring for others. "Sounding good" refers to the rhetoric surrounding music as much as musical sound. Cheng's argument employs "affect theory, care ethics (refracted through disability studies and ideas of dependence), and queer theory" (11).



Three figures and ideas persist through the terrain of the book: (1) Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concepts of paranoid and reparative reading, (2) Suzanne Cusick's musicological applications of Sedgwick's concepts, and (3) Cheng's own experiences in the search for a life of care. Sedgwick argues that paranoia is the common mode of scholarship, consisting of searching to find flaws in the work of others and ensuring against the future attacks of others. In short, employing paranoid techniques that "sound good" elevates scholarly status. Cheng, building upon Cusick's exploration of the implications of paranoia for musicology, directly opposes the paranoid tendency to distance the author from the text by framing most chapters with personal stories, ranging from childhood to the awareness of his gay identity to dealing with debilitating chronic pain. He states that the argument of the book "makes little sense without a sense of self at the center" and hopes that including himself in the book encourages readers to "scrutinize the book more, not less" (26). As performative rhetoric, Cheng reminds the reader of his authorship, resisting the distance that paranoid reading requires.

Book reviews are, for the most part, paranoid. I would be surprised if anyone who has published an academic book has not received a review that is more about the reviewer "sounding good" than about engaging with the book. Given

this book's topic, writing a review involves self-paranoia about the rhetoric employed. At times I may unwittingly fall into what might be criticized as paranoid rhetorical habits, but in what follows my aim is to be both charitable to and critical of the text. Care and repair does not eschew criticism, and—even though I believe this book is excellently written and a valuable contribution—I will not avoid criticism.

Chapter 1 introduces elements that recur in later chapters, including a personal story, a problem within the academy, and an opportunity for care or repair. Cheng begins with an account of developing chronic pain, including his struggles coping with his altered relationship with listening to and playing music. The personal search for repair pivots to his reading of Jean-Luc Nancy's *Listening*. Cheng discusses his negative emotional response to the dense text and argues that instead of ignoring these feelings, "my queer failure to understand Nancy may offer its own humble revelations" (32). Cheng questions whether Nancy's "unclear" language "verge[s] on the unethical" (33). Although Cheng admits his reading was not reparative, this discussion nonetheless gets at central questions: "What is the purpose of sounding smart and writing well? Amid the imperatives of knowledge, aptitude, and eloquence, where do compassion and care fit in?" (33). These are important questions, but unfortunately we leave this section without any argument about when and why non-reparative readings are appropriate. Are my undergraduate students justified in complaining about the rhetorical complexity of the texts I assign? Could a non-scientist complain about the impenetrable rhetoric of a specialized scientific discourse? Is Cheng arguing that academic ways of rhetorically sounding good should be replaced with more direct and clear rhetoric, or does this just replace one rhetorical standard for another? Later Cheng states that "incomprehension doesn't justify instant dismissal or cynicism" (43). Cheng closes the chapter with a return to personal narrative, and here he finds an opportunity for repair: "What I care about most is seeking a reparative lifestyle for myself and for those closest to me, as long as I'm able" (36). Cheng's emphasis on searching for repair within personal circles signals that a takeaway of his book is finding repair with those with whom we later come into contact (later in chapter 4, Cheng calls this local repair "microrepair").

Chapter 2 looks more closely at the paranoia in scholarship and academic institutions in hopes of making space for reparative practices. Cheng touches on topics ranging from paranoid academic language usage to the neoliberal influence on academic institutions that increases paranoia in venues such as online job wikis, and also does not allow for taking time for academic work (whether as a choice or due to disability). Linking paranoia and neoliberalism, Cheng argues that it "boil[s] down to power" (42). Making this book available as an open access format (alongside traditional hardcover and paper editions) is perhaps a small act of resistance. Cheng calls for "finding truth in care" (51), resisting approaches—including neoliberalism and musical autonomy—that do not take care into account.

Sedgwick and others have observed that queer studies have been particularly paranoid, and within musicology this is no exception. In chapter 3 Cheng

searches for the compassion, justice, tolerance, and pride that “pops up between the lines” within queer studies (59). Instead of finding a model of repair in academic writing, Cheng uses a scene in the television program *Louie* as a “parable” (68). After a scene that almost escalates to violence, the reparative moment is the “calm, honest conversation” that follows (69). Repair, once again, is found in a local moment. Just how that moment might animate a reparative musicology is left to the reader.

Chapter 4 examines damaging sound practices, from torture, to jets on the Gaza strip, to scenes from media including *Charmed*, *Homeland*, and *Grand Theft Auto*. The underlying question in the chapter is how we—as people and musicologists—should respond. The problem Cheng identifies is that damaging sounds are considered merely sound (just vibrations), a common view that underlies everyday interactions with sound and allows sound to be considered a non-invasive persuasive device. How, then, might we create a world “where the question of whether music torture can be torturous wouldn’t be asked in the first place” (86–7). Cheng posits “microrepair,” “mobilizing our littlest everyday behaviors” to create an awareness of the sounds around us (83). If music studies should involve “listening for better worlds” (10), then strangely absent in this chapter are the efforts of others—including Pauline Oliveros, Steven Feld, and R. Murray Schafer—whose work encourages wider awareness of soundscapes. Cheng’s argument seems to cohere with the call to listen from these authors, but adds to them the impetus to listen for care.

The book’s “coda” extends the motif of the previous chapter with a discussion of long-range acoustic devices and Suzanne Cusick’s writings on music and torture. In his discussion of Cusick, Cheng voices an underlying assumption in the book. The book’s rhetoric has denounced paranoia in favour of repair, even while each chapter draws from both approaches. Seemingly counter to the binary set up earlier in the text, Cheng claims that “the paranoid and the reparative are not locked in a zero-sum game. A rule of thumb would be to pursue repair where possible and to rely on paranoia when necessary” (100). Cheng also builds upon Cusick’s call for a “reparative musicology” that “would restore love for music,” adding that it should “simultaneously restore love for people and reconstruct the opportunities for care among them” (98). These statements are important calls to the discipline, but difficult to put into practice. It seems the entire question is when it is good/just/caring/ethical to use paranoid or reparative modes.

The book is very well written and drew me in as a reader. As the criticism of those who sound good in academia is done with enviably readable rhetorical strategies, it is worth asking Cheng’s question of his own text: what is the purpose of this (admittedly different) rhetorical sounding good? Additionally, aside from the calls for repair from Sedgwick and Cusick, few musicologists are identified as examples of reparative approaches in musicology. Most reparative moments in the text take place outside of musicology. Is the discipline so bereft of examples of reparative writing? There are plenty of musicologists who are generous readers and show great care for others in their work and

professional practice, even if their writing does utilize some of the rhetorical hallmarks of the paranoid mode Cheng identifies.

In short, I value the call for care in musicology, yet am not quite sure how Cheng would hope for me to show care in my writing. My own research argues that music and musicology are bound up with other people and ethics, but I leave this book paranoid that I've unwittingly assumed paranoid rhetoric in my writing and might be open to "care-based" criticisms. More calls for considering care for others are needed for musicology and musical practice, and Cheng's book is an important and timely reminder for musicology. But just as much as calls for care, we need models of caring musicology.

JEFF WARREN

### **BIOGRAPHY**

Jeff R. Warren, PhD is Professor of Music and Humanities at Quest University in Squamish, British Columbia. His book *Music and Ethical Responsibility* (Cambridge University Press) examines the ethical implications of everyday musical experiences. Current research projects include: musical multimedia and mountain biking culture, Christian congregational music, and the relationship between music, politics, and phenomenology using post-1968 Paris as a case study. His creative work includes sound recording, sound installations, and performance on double and electric bass. Before moving to Quest in 2013, Jeff spent nine years teaching at Trinity Western University, where he retains the title of Adjunct Professor of Music and Interdisciplinary Arts. More at <https://jeffrwarren.wordpress.com>.