Introduction to the Occasional Conference, "The Sociology of Music: An Exploration of Issues," Held at Peter Robinson College, Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, August 4-6, 1983

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To say that musical structures, musical processes and musical textures are in some way reflective of the culture and society in which they are created is to make a claim that most historical musicologists would find unexceptional and unobjectionable. However, to follow through on this claim, to explore systematically and rigorously the precise nature of the relationships between musical and social processes has been to engage in a task that is not only difficult intellectually but that has evoked resistance from within the hallowed halls of conventional musicology. To persist in this task from a critical perspective, with a mind open to the possibility that established wisdoms concerning the value and aesthetic acceptability of different musical styles are not beyond question has been to verge on the scandalous. As Christopher Ballantine recently remarked:

At a time when remarkable headway has been made in the development of Marxist aesthetics in other areas of artistic production (literature, painting and cinema, for example), one of the greatest obstacles in the way of the creation of a Marxist musical aesthetics is the obdurate hegemony of a bourgeois professional musical elite in all forums where “classical” music is produced, taught, researched, theorized, or reproduced. So total is this hegemony that it is nearly impossible in the corridors of its influence to sustain the view that a different conceptualization of music could even be thought. A condition of one-dimensionality is here thoroughly installed: attempts to challenge and confront it produce a kind of scandal, if they are heard at all (Ballantine 1984: xviii).

These are harsh words. Yet they should be taken seriously, not only because they ring true in the ears of those who have worked to bring about alternative musicologies, but more importantly, because they come from the pen of a scholar with an enviable record of publications in recognized musicology journals. The malaise has been acknowledged from within.
Something is clearly at stake. There is little doubt that mainstream sociology, particularly as it is practised in North America, is bankrupt where the arts and culture are concerned. Models of society that blueprint the individual will always encounter difficulties in teasing out the social and cultural processes which breath the very life, the very creativity into individual artifacts. If people are essentially social animals, then they are so in ways that are active rather than passive. Failing to recognize this, conventional sociology can, in the words of Howard S. Becker, do little more than “claim the domain of the arts for sociology in return for a promissory note for an analysis to be delivered, if all goes well, on some later occasion.” As Becker concludes, “sociologists have left so many of these obligations unredeemed that artists and humanistic scholars have become justifiably wary of their pretensions” (Becker 1977: xiii).

Musicians and musicologists have every right, therefore, to be wary of sociological approaches that would squeeze the life out of music, see it purely as “social function,” and so deny its very musicality. However, to argue that musical processes are social processes is not, inevitably, to lead to this consequence in the understanding of musical life and musical creativity. There are schools of sociology, cultural anthropology, semiology, and structuralism that stress the centrality of individuals in creating and shaping the social world, that is, life and reality itself, through various symbolic systems including that of “music.” When the power of music to actively shape our lives is more securely grasped, it may then be possible to move more successfully than hitherto in releasing much music from its present position of bondage, either as the “cultural capital” of those with power and influence, or as “ephemeral trivia,” relegated to the “inconsequential” status of entertainment and leisure.

The purpose of the Trent Conference was to raise the issues implicit in undertaking a sociology of music, to highlight the area as deserving more attention than it presently receives from the academic world, to bring together scholars in Canada interested in the field, and to make them aware not only of each others’ work but the work also of major figures outside Canada. The Conference was judged successful in these aims by those who attended. Some twenty-four papers were given by twenty-seven presenters from Canada, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the
United States of America. It was possible for the many Canadian
graduate students who attended the Conference and gave papers
to discuss their work and topics of mutual interest with scholars
such as Steven Feld, Simon Frith, Charles Keil, Philip Tagg, and
Graham Vulliamy — scholars who have made and are currently
making important contributions to the understanding of music
as a cultural and social phenomenon.

The papers in this issue do not attempt to be representative
of the Conference as a whole. Sessions were held on Socio-
musicological Theory, The Sociological Analysis of Musical
Forms, Definitions and Legitimations of Music, Contemporary
Subcultural Music, The Sociology of Punk, the Sociology of
Music Education, and Music and the Environment. Given
constraints related to space and availability of papers, the seven
included here should be regarded simply as an illustration of the
diverse topics aired and discussed at the Conference. Jan Ling's
paper is a useful historical survey of the field of the sociology of
music, with particular emphasis on work in Sweden and the
German-speaking and East European worlds. Graham Vulliamy
critically summarizes extant work in the sociology of music
education, while Harry Haughton, in work extracted from his
Ed.D. dissertation makes important connections between state-
influenced processes of social and cultural reproduction and the
views and attitudes of those concerned with music education on
a day-to-day basis. Chris McCormick, in a paper based largely
on content analysis, discusses the ways in which Maritime folk
song both reflects and contributes to the lives of people in that
part of Canada. Continuing the focus on Canada, Lynn Whidden
engages in an informal analysis of the aesthetic reasons
underlying the predilection of many native poeples for country
music. Will Straw's paper is a perceptive study of the processes
through which Heavy Metal cultures create and maintain largely
ahistorical and socially distanced world views and self-images.
Finally, Howard Broomfield discusses the composition of In
Doig People's Ears, a juxtaposition of sound-scape materials
designed to create a feel for the history of the Beaver Indian
people.

It became clear from the Conference that a surprising level of
work is underway in Canada in the sociology of music. There
was also strong feeling that the Conference should be continued
as a regular event in the Canadian academic calendar. That aim
was recently furthered through a two-day International Con-
ference on "Popular Music in the University" held at Carleton University, March 29-30, 1985. I hope that the papers in this issue will be of interest to readers of this journal as evidence of both the amount and level of work presently carried out largely by scholars other than historical musicologists whose inclusion in the research and teaching programs of music departments could hardly help but enliven and enrich the curriculum.

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