

Sounds & society



Themes in the sociology of music

ciology Of Music

PETER J. MARTIN

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Preface

The subtitle of this book should be taken seriously, for in it I am concerned to explore just some of the ways in which, I believe, distinctively sociological ideas can make a useful contribution to our understanding of music. In other words, this is not intended as a comprehensive sociology of music; given the present, rather inchoate, state of the field such an attempt would be both premature and unduly didactic. This may seem a somewhat perverse position, given the long availability to the English-speaking reader of such texts as Adorno's *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (1962), Silberman's *Sociology of Music* (1963) and Supicic's more recent *Music in Society: A Guide to the Sociology of Music* (1987). However, despite the undoubted value of each of these rather disparate texts, it is my contention that none of them can stand as an authoritative basis for the sociologically informed study of music.

Silberman's approach, for example, derives from a position which would nowadays be widely rejected as empiricist, or even as an example of 'naive' positivism. His concern, he writes, is with the 'structural elements of the musical world', and he holds that the sociology of music must adhere to the same 'fundamental propositions' as general sociology: 'observation of facts, generalizations based on the examination of these facts, and the construction of explanatory theories on that basis' (1963: 14, 48). As is well known, it was precisely this sort of analysis that Adorno – among many others – was determined to attack as pseudo-science, as ideology masquerading as objectivity. Yet, as I argue in Chapter 3, Adorno's own contribution must ultimately be regarded as grounded on certain philosophical, or aesthetic, presuppositions rather than recognisably sociological ones. Moreover, and in my view equally disabling, all three authors,

steeped in the European intellectual tradition, are concerned overwhelmingly with European 'art' music; that is, far from being concerned with music in societies, they limit their scope to what is in fact *one* of the traditions of music-making in the western world, which, for all its prestige and cultural authority, is not and never has been the music of the majority of the people. Moreover, the very uniqueness of western 'classical' music, which these authors both acknowledge and celebrate, means that their analyses, however insightful, have little to tell us about other cultures, times, and places – in other words, about most music in most societies.

For Supicic, indeed, the 'lack of education or disposition toward a highly cultured music in the masses' were 'problems' to be resolved through the work of sociologists, psychologists, and the formulation of a 'proper cultural and educational policy' (1987: 231). Adorno, as is well known, subscribed to Schoenberg's dictum that 'If it is art it is not for all, and if it is for all, it is not art' and – in so far as he paid any attention to it – was dismissive of 'popular music', regarding it as above all a commodity which functioned to adjust people to the 'mechanisms of present-day life' (1990: 311–12). In the present context, and, I suggest, for sociologists generally, the point is not to join the partisans on one or other side of the 'mass culture' debate, nor to attempt to formulate yet another definition of 'art', but to regard such debates and aesthetic conflicts as themselves the topic for investigation. Adorno's work, therefore, is to be seen not as neutral or detached in a scholarly way but as a polemic which has served to add authority and intellectual respectability to one tradition of musical modernism, and which has contributed to the lowly status of other forms of musical expression. For the sociologists, terms such as 'art' and the 'masses' are not concepts whose validity must go unquestioned but are rather to be understood as rhetorical devices, inviting us to see the world in particular ways (and not others). So, despite the sophistication and erudition of Adorno's aesthetic theory, his claim that it is the business of the sociology of music to make aesthetic judgements must be disputed. The implication, of course, is that neither the defenders of the musical hierarchy nor those who challenge them by championing popular forms are to be regarded as having access to the truth of the matter. From a sociological point of view they are all contenders in a perpetual contest for cultural legitimacy, all making claims on behalf of, or against, particular ways of doing things. This sort of approach has lately been discussed

by some of those seeking to develop the theory of culture, especially since the renewal of interest in the works of Antonio Gramsci; in this as in other matters, however, the cultural theorists have arrived rather late in the day, often unfamiliar with basic sociological texts. There is, for example, a wealth of insight into the politics of cultural forms in the work of Max Weber, who was himself adamant that aesthetic value-judgements and sociological analysis must be clearly separated (Freund, 1968: 267).

Nevertheless, it is the rise of interest in cultural studies generally which has allowed the serious analysis of popular music, long overdue, to flourish. Not that the hegemony of western classical music has been subverted: even in Christopher Norris's collection of essays on *Music and the Politics of Culture*, which sets out to view music as a 'field of competing social forces' (1989: 10), ten out of thirteen contributors are concerned with composed music of the western art-music tradition. And, perhaps most remarkably, Edward Said – who has done as much as any modern writer to put the parameters of western thought back into a broader cultural context – is exclusively concerned with this tradition in *Musical Elaborations* (1992). But at least figures like Norris and Said are aware, as some of their predecessors were not, that western 'classical' music is neither the sonic form of natural forces, nor a universal language, nor the epitome of human creativity, nor the music to which all cultures aspire. It is indeed a rich and elaborately developed tradition, but that development owes much to a number of significant social processes, not least the gradual release of music from the requirement that it should be functional in some way or another, thus establishing the conditions under which it could become, as Adorno put it, an 'autonomous art'. It is through social processes, too, that the 'classical' tradition has become established as dominant in the hierarchy of musical styles – the economic, political and cultural power of its patrons and proselytisers investing it with authority and legitimacy.

Given the cultural predominance – one is tempted to call it hegemony – of the 'classical' tradition, the neglect of 'popular' forms by scholars is understandable, if not excusable from a sociological point of view. Moreover, to the orthodox musicologist just as to the devotee of Beethoven, Mahler, or Stravinsky, much popular music does indeed sound simple, predictable and repetitive. However, as Adorno himself insisted, 'the difference and between the spheres cannot be adequately expressed in terms of complexity and simplicity' (1990:

305) The textures, timbres and rhythms and devices of some of the 'popular' styles, as John Shepherd (1991) has emphasised, simply cannot be reconciled with the conventions of 'classical' music. Moreover, some performers in the non-classical spheres, notably jazz, play music of a complexity approached only by the serious avant-garde, and which 'makes sense' only when heard in different ways, using different criteria of evaluation. Even when music is simple and banal, however, it is not therefore devoid of interest or importance; indeed, such music, and the social practices in which it is embedded, may be of greater interest to the sociologist than to the musicologist.

So one reason for the unsatisfactory state of the sociology of music is the virtual hegemony of the 'classical' music tradition. Another, although related, reason is the somewhat partial views of those often quite eminent sociologists and social theorists who have written about music. In fact there are quite a few distinguished contributors to the field: Herbert Spencer, Georg Simmel, Ernst Bloch, T. W. Adorno, Norbert Elias, Max Weber and Alfred Schütz, among others. Despite their efforts, however, no very coherent sociological perspective on music has emerged, partly owing to their preoccupation with the 'classical' tradition, but perhaps more importantly because each has tended to see music in the light of his own particular theoretical concerns, which are not easily reconciled. Thus, for example, Elias's discussion of Mozart (1993) places him in the context of the general 'civilising process', while Weber (1958) looks at music as an aspect of 'rationalisation' in the western world, and Schütz (1971) argues that it can reveal the fundamental processes of human communication. Both Spencer and Simmel were participants in a somewhat futile debate about the origins of music (initiated by Darwin's view that musical communication preceded speech in humans, being a development of mating calls) (Etzkorn, 1964), while Bloch's remarks give little encouragement to sociological thinking, emphasising the independence of music from 'external factors' and arguing that the work of each 'great master' is autonomous. 'Beethoven', declared Bloch, 'evolves solely from within himself' (1985: 9).

By contrast, the position adopted in this book is that many of the ideas and concepts which have been developed in general sociological discourse can be employed in ways which enhance our understanding of music and of the social contexts in which it is created, performed and heard. Some of these ideas, and their relevance for

music, are discussed in general terms in Chapter 1, followed by a consideration in Chapter 2 of the question of musical meaning; it is argued that a sociological perspective not only avoids some of the difficulties of established approaches to this topic but can reformulate the issues in fruitful ways, moving away from a concern with the deciphering of texts and concentrating on the social processes through which meanings are constituted and sustained. Another fundamental matter is taken up in Chapters 3 and 4, where we examine the idea that the form and character of music somehow reflect – or echo – the nature of the society in which it is produced. This is done first through a discussion of Adorno's views on the relationship between music and society, and then (in Chapter 4) by considering certain more recent attempts to demonstrate correspondences between musical and social structures.

Despite the widespread acceptance of the idea that there is some sort of link between forms of music and forms of society – and the fact that this notion is itself a fundamentally 'sociological' one – I argue that efforts to specify the connection in a theoretically adequate way have been largely unsuccessful. Indeed, the difficulties which are encountered in this context – notably an ambivalence over the nature of musical meaning and a tendency to reify social structures – are characteristic of 'structural' sociological perspectives in general; thus in Chapter 5 an alternative approach, drawing on the 'interpretive' tradition and in particular Howard Becker's view of social organisation as collective action, is outlined. This perspective serves also to reorient the field, switching attention away from hypothetical 'structures' and focusing on the processes through which real people, in real situations, both make music and make use of music. Among other things, this way of approaching musical life leads us to see it less as 'Art' and more as work: some studies of music-making and of musicians as an occupational group are considered, but it should be evident that this is an area where further research would pay dividends.

The idea of music as work leads fairly directly to the notion of music itself as a commodity, one which has generated a quite large industry in modern capitalist societies. It would take another book, or a whole series of books, to consider the theme of music and the rise of capitalism in any adequate way; accordingly, some of the topics of particular interest to sociologists are briefly outlined at the start of Chapter 6, followed by a more extended discussion of the

music business, its social organisation, and its fundamental problem of reconciling the rationalised formal business procedures of advanced capitalism with volatile artists, on the one hand, and a hugely unpredictable market, on the other. (Accountants cannot feel entirely comfortable with the knowledge that the fortunes of a multi-million dollar business may depend on the mood swings of thousands of sullen adolescents or the antics of a handful of zany disc jockeys.) Thus the industry faces the perpetual problem of trying to work out what 'the kids' will buy. For the sociologist, however, the fascination lies in the fact that – until now, at any rate – they have bought music, and have continued to buy it as they have grown older. This persistent demand, and a sequence of remarkable technological innovations, have given people unprecedented access to, and control over, music; it is arguable that music is now a more central element in the culture of advanced industrial societies than it has been in any earlier time or place, and thus that it is worth trying to remedy the rather undeveloped state of the sociology of music.

As I have already said, however, this is in no respect intended as a comprehensive treatment. Given space, and time, it would have been useful to have said more about the work of a whole range of European scholars (there is a helpful bibliography in Supicic, 1987) and about music in non-western societies (Manuel, 1988, provides an excellent introduction). It has taken some time to assemble this book, during which the field itself has changed, particularly with the substantial growth of popular music studies (see Frith and Goodwin, 1990, and Bennett *et al.*, 1993) and the welcome emergence of critical perspectives emanating from recent feminist thought (see McClary, 1991, and Solie, 1993). Some of these developments are considered in this text; it is a safe bet, however, that their full effects are yet to be felt.

I am grateful to a very large number of people who have helped this project in various ways. My colleague David Morgan and the students on our 'Sociology of Literature, Art & Music' course provided the encouragement and the opportunity to develop some of the ideas which follow; over the years when we ran it, the topics raised in SLAM moved from the margins to the centre of sociological concerns, stimulated by the growth of interest in cultural and media studies. I am particularly grateful, too, for conversations with Tia DeNora, Ian Kemp, David Horn, John Shepherd, and – a very long time ago – Howard Becker. Parts of the manuscript were read by

David Horn, Tia DeNora, Anita Roy and my colleague Rod Watson; to them I offer thanks, and the hope that they will not be blamed for the outcome. Successive editors at Manchester University Press – John Banks, who got the whole thing going, Anita Roy and Vicki Whittaker – have been not only patient but invariably supportive. My colleagues in the Department of Sociology at the University of Manchester allowed me a period of study leave in which some of the initial work was done, and two of them – John Lee and Wes Sharrock – have for many years managed to combine the roles of teacher, colleague and friend.

I am immensely grateful to them all, but above all to Yvonne, Tom, and Claire, who made it possible.

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Introduction: sociology and music

the spread of a realistic, social view of music would be dangerous to those for whom the confusion and mysticism of the present viewpoint is valuable.

Elie Siegmeister (quoted in Chanan, 1981: 222)

Sociology's misfortune is that it discovers the arbitrary and the contingent where we like to see necessity, or nature ... and that it discovers necessity, social constraints, where we would like to see choice and free will.

Pierre Bourdieu (1990: 14)

Sociology has often been seen, not without reason, as a somewhat perverse sort of enterprise, apparently generating problems where none exist, and persistently enquiring into matters which, to most sensible people, seem perfectly straightforward. The sociologist who applies the theoretical perspectives of the discipline to music must expect, therefore, that the effort will be met with a degree of suspicion. What's the problem? For most of us, to a greater or lesser extent, music is part of our lives. It is, as the economists say, a 'good'. We can do things, all sorts of things, to it. We can buy it in various recorded forms, or play it ourselves. We hear it on radio, television and in films and go to performances at which it is the main attraction. In short, in advanced industrial societies music is all around us, a major element in our culture, in contrast to the situation in pre-electronic times when it was a much less pervasive medium, and a much smaller part of most people's experience. It is this contrast, though, that may serve to arouse our sociological

curiosity: instead of just taking music for granted, we might begin to ask *why* it has come to occupy such a prominent place in our world.

After all, it is generally accepted that the culture of modern industrial societies, particularly capitalist societies, is formed above all by the impersonal ethos of scientific rationality, on the one hand, and by the cold imperative of economic calculation, on the other. The religious ceremonies of earlier times, in which music was central, have dwindled in importance, as have the communal festivities and social events at which music was played. So why has music – deeply personal, emotional, even ephemeral – not only survived but flourished in such an apparently inhospitable culture? Seen from this angle, it is not at all obtuse for the sociologist to ask who listens to music and who plays it, or when and why they do so, especially in view of the importance which people so often attach to their music. These initial questions can lead us on to consider a range of wider issues concerned with music, culture and society, some of which are explored in this book. There are many people, of course, who react with suspicion to the very idea of a sociology of music, and some who will flatly reject the contention that sociological analysis can add anything useful to either the study or the enjoyment of music. So another aim of the book is simply to suggest that such views are mistaken.

Sociological perspectives

However, before discussing the contributions that sociological work can make to our understanding of music, it may be helpful to make some preliminary remarks about the nature of sociological ideas themselves. This is important, mainly because some of these ideas will emerge in various guises throughout the book, but also because – in my experience at least – such ideas and their profound implications are not always well understood. Indeed, there is a strong current of opinion which regards as ‘sociology’ virtually anything which happens to be said or written about society. All sorts of self-proclaimed pundits and do-gooders are routinely described in the media as sociologists, despite their lack of qualifications in the subject and their evident unfamiliarity with it. Sadly, too, it must be said that some sociologists themselves have from time to time displayed a somewhat cavalier attitude to the aims and boundaries of the discipline. The activities of all these people have done much to reinforce

the widespread view of sociology as a less than coherent subject in which 'anything goes'.

The reader may be reassured (or perhaps disappointed) that I do not share such a view. On the contrary, my initial supposition is that if sociology, no less than any other area of enquiry, is to be entitled to the status of an academic discipline, then both its aims and the specific nature of its contribution must be clearly defined. This can best be done, I believe, by considering the position of sociology amongst the other human sciences.

Unlike economics, or political science or law, for example, sociology is not concerned with a certain subset of social activities: rather it provides a particular perspective on all such activities, with a view to increasing our understanding of them. Thus there is a sociology of economic activity, of politics, of law and so on, just as there can be a sociology of music. So the crucial question concerns the nature of this perspective: what is distinctive about the way in which the sociologist examines the activities of human beings and the societies in which they live? At first sight it may seem impossible to give a simple or straightforward answer, since one of the things for which sociologists are notorious is their inability to agree on such basic matters as the proper aims of the discipline, the theories which should inform social research and the methods with which such studies should be carried out. Such disagreements, it should be said, are not peculiar to sociology, being apparent to the practitioners of every science, though seldom to the wider public. (Moreover, it may be argued that far from being an indication of sociology's immaturity, the intensity of such disputes may reflect a degree of theoretical sophistication not always encountered in, say, economics or psychology.) Despite the widespread and profound disagreements, however, it is possible – and necessary – to identify a common thread running through the work of even the most apparently disparate of sociologists. All such work, from the apocalyptic macro-theories of structural Marxism to the detailed investigations of conversational analysis, is guided by the perception that the words, thoughts and deeds of individual human beings are profoundly influenced by the nature of the social circumstances in which they occur. It follows that in order to understand the former we must investigate the latter.

As we shall see presently, such a perspective does not entail the idea that human beings are no more than puppets whose strings are manipulated by the greater forces of society, or that as individuals

we simply mirror the characteristics of our cultural context. None the less, it has been the specific contribution of sociological thinkers to emphasise the extent to which we do absorb, or 'internalise', elements of our cultures, and that the ways of thinking, acting and feeling which we assume are normal and natural are in fact the results of a lengthy and complex process through which we *learn* to operate in accordance with prevailing conventions – the process of 'socialisation.'

The works of the classic sociological thinkers are permeated by such ideas. In challenging the political economists of his day, for example, Karl Marx rejected their assumption that 'economic man', acting rationally in pursuit of self-interest, could serve as a model of the natural qualities of human beings. On the contrary, Marx argued, capitalist society does not reflect the basic or innate qualities of people; rather, such characteristics as calculated self-interest, competitiveness, pursuit of wealth and acquisitiveness are engendered by such a society. These are the qualities which you need to have in order to make out in this kind of society, and they may, as in modern western societies, come to be regarded as 'human nature'; in other cultures, however, and in other historical periods they may be absent or regarded as aberrant. So economic man did not create capitalism as the ultimate stage of human progress: capitalism created economic man, and in Marx's view this was not so much the realisation of human potential as its perversion. The whole thrust of Marx's thinking on this point is conveyed in one of his most celebrated aphorisms: 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary it is their social being that determines their consciousness' (1976: 3).

For all the sociological insight of Marx's writings, however, it was not at all his intention to contribute towards the establishment of an academic discipline. But such an aim was explicit in the work of another of sociology's classic theorists, Emile Durkheim. Running through all of Durkheim's studies is an unremitting criticism of those who have sought to explain society, which he held to be a collective phenomenon, in terms of the characteristics of individuals. Logically and historically, Durkheim argued, society is prior to the individual. Indeed, the evolution of human societies has involved a gradual transition from original conditions in which human consciousness was primarily collective, in the sense that people were aware of themselves primarily as members of a tribe or clan, to more modern, dif-

ferentiated, forms in which we think of ourselves as unique, distinctive and autonomous persons. In Durkheim's view then, our modern concept of 'the individual' is itself a historically specific, and comparatively recent, phenomenon.

Durkheim's arguments thus provide a powerful critique of 'individualistic' theories of society, whether political (as in the idea of the 'social contract') or economic (as in the assumption of 'economic man'). They also brought him directly into conflict with psychology in so far as that discipline attempted to account for human action in terms of either some supposed fundamental structures of the mind, or if individuals' particular mental make-up, as in the modern concept of personality. In general, sociological thinkers have been dubious about the idea of universal or innate structures of the mind, since (a) no one has satisfactorily demonstrated what these are, and (b) the idea is hard to reconcile with the sheer variety of modes of thought which have been found empirically. In other cultures, and at earlier historical periods in our own culture, people whose brains are almost identical to ours have perceived their world in fundamentally different ways – even such apparently basic notions as our concepts of space and time seem to be culturally variable, as is, to anticipate a later point, our idea of music. Moreover, sociologists have followed Durkheim in insisting on the idea that individual personalities are not the irreducible elements of social life but are formed in an already existing cultural environment. Through the ubiquitous process of socialisation we learn to accept the validity of conventions, customs and beliefs which, however weird or arbitrary they may seem to the cultural outsider, have acquired the status of binding moral rules. Thus in his teaching on education, for example, Durkheim was concerned to stress that it is not so much a process in which our inherent capacities are brought out as one in which the values, beliefs and behavioural norms of society are instilled into us. Whatever our individual desires, urges and abilities may be, we are none the less shaped in the image of our societies.

Above all, in learning a language we are not only developing a technical ability to communicate with others, we are simultaneously absorbing the concepts, categories and cognitive style of the culture which envelops us. The ability to communicate symbolically through language is what distinguishes us as humans from other animals, and ultimately allows us to control the natural environment to which they are still subject. It should be clear from what has been said

already that the very process which makes us distinctively human is a social process. We do not, as infants, create our own individual language, but must learn the ones we hear around us, and so implicitly accept the patterns of thought that they convey. Moreover, as we learn to interact with others, their reactions to us lead us to understand prevailing notions of right and wrong, correct and incorrect and so on. It is from the responses of others, too, that we develop the very idea of our 'selves' (Mead, 1934). And even in that mysterious realm of awareness that we call 'subjective' there are limits to our autonomy. 'The social world and its organisation of social activities is *basic* to any understanding we might derive about mental life. Real intentions, real motives, real thoughts and real understandings are social phenomena through and through (Coulter, 1979: 6). The point is of considerable importance in the present context, as Vulliamy and Shepherd make clear: 'If the significance of music is irrevocably linked to the patternings of individual minds, then it must likewise be linked to the fluid, dynamic and abstract patterning of the social world that lies behind the creation and construction of those minds' (1984: 60).

It is in such ways that culture may be said to mould the personality, and society to penetrate the individual; these considerations also suggest the contrast between sociological and psychological approaches to phenomena such as music, and indicate why sociologists tend to regard the latter as, at best, only part of the story. In *The Psychology of Music* John Davies argues that 'the psychological study of music involves examination of the relationships between the rules of music and the laws of perception and cognition, in so far as these latter are understood (1978: 19). But, as I have suggested above, the thrust of sociological thinking is to question whether there are in fact 'laws of perception and cognition' in the sense that such laws could be said to govern *all* human thinking. How could such laws be reconciled with the amazing heterogeneity of cognitive modes which have been observed in different cultures? However, what initially seems like a basic conflict between sociological and psychological perspectives can, I think, be reconciled. Firstly, whereas psychologists have been much concerned with what might be described as the mechanisms of perception and cognition – with our sensory apparatus, the anatomy of the brain and so on – sociologists have been interested in *what* people perceive and think: with the consequences of the remarkable fact that human beings whose brains are virtually