The Cultural Study of Music

a critical introduction

Edited by
Martin Clayton
Trevor Herbert
Richard Middleton

the Cultural Study of Music

a critical introduction

edited by Martin Clayton
Trevor Herbert
Richard Middleton

Routledge
New York and London

Published in 2003 by
Routledge
29 West 35th Street
New York, NY 10001
www.routledge-ny.com

Published in Great Britain by
Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane
London EC4P 4EE
www.routledge.co.uk

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group.
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

10 9 8 7 6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The cultural study of music : a critical introduction / edited by Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, Richard Middleton.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-415-93844-9 (hardcover : alk. paper) — ISBN 0-415-93845-7 (pbk. : alk paper)
1. Music—Philosophy and aesthetics. 2. Music—Social aspects. I. Clayton, Martin. II. Herbert, Trevor. III. Middleton, Richard.
ML3845 .C85 2002
306.4'84—dc21

2002152031

the Cultural Study of Music

Contents

INTRODUCTION

Music Studies and the Idea of Culture

RICHARD MIDDLETON

In recent years we have, one might suppose, seen the publication of more than enough navel-gazing collections exploring the current state of the disciplines of music studies. Why another? The idea for this book arose in a quite specific moment. Members of the newly formed Musics and Cultures Research Group at The Open University in Britain found that, although their work as individuals stemmed from a variety of disciplinary positions, they shared a sense that, to quote the book proposal:

> A tendency towards increasing concern with "culture" has been manifested in music scholarship for some time, and in a variety of ways. It would be too much to say that the various trajectories are converging, let alone that all will crystallize into a single field of "cultural musicology." Nonetheless, different approaches are interacting, and with increasing intensity, such that it is clear that a new paradigm may well be on the horizon. All the disciplines involved in the study of music will continue to be changed by this process, and some form of reconfiguration seems inevitable.

It is more than five years since the original discussions, and the degree of programmatic clarity signaled, however hesitantly, in that statement already looks premature. The contents of this book could certainly not be taken to justify the announcement of any new paradigm (even though they do map many of the trajectories, approaches, and changes that we had in mind); but that was to be expected. More disappointing is the fact

that, in the discipline at large, the process of reconfiguration seems to have slowed markedly. This alone would justify engagement with the questions that initially exercised us, especially when so many other essays in intradisciplinary reassessment concentrate on one perspective alone (gender, the canon, history, musical analysis, or whatever the case may be).

To look across the full range of disciplinary perspectives is important. Indeed, the parallelism of the different histories of engagement with "musics and cultures" research, together with their varied dialogues, seems to be integral to its problematic. The cultural turn in ethnomusicology associated above all with Alan Merriam's *The Anthropology of Music* (1964) and carried forward subsequently by Blacking, Feld, and many others; the maturing (from Howard Becker to Antoine Hennion and Tia DeNora) of a cultural sociology interested in music; the emergence of Anglophone cultural studies in the 1970s, its work on music partly overlapping with the equally new area of popular music studies (Frith, Hebdige, Grossberg, Tagg); the development of a "new" or "critical musicology," its birth conventionally dated from Joseph Kerman's *Musicology* (1985), and most influentially represented in the work of such authors as McClary, Tomlinson, and Kramer: the concurrence of these histories, roughly through the final three decades of the twentieth century, following distinctive but often mutually affecting routes, marks a historical node in thinking about music that demands attention. This story, of course, is a story of the Western, particularly the Anglophone, academy. But then, notwithstanding the fruits of a multitude of ethnographic fieldwork projects, that academy has been conspicuously poor at learning from other intellectual traditions, or recognizing its impact in the outside world.

It is hard to delineate with precision all that these various trajectories have in common, beyond a position against pure musical autonomy: "Music is more than *notes*" represents the bottom line, an idea whose seeming banality today perhaps signals its triumph. But this idea would hardly have come as a surprise to Baroque theorists of *Affektenlehre*, or medieval thinkers about music and theology, or even Plato (not to mention classical Indian or Chinese music theorists). What was new in the late twentieth century, however, was precisely the concept of *culture*, in a specific sense associated with the post-Enlightenment world. We will return to the ramifications of this concept; for now, it is enough to note the political thrust of its usages in late modernity, which, within musical studies, has generated a whole range of characteristic impulses: attacks on "the canon," on "great composer history," and on "transcendental" aesthetics;

critiques of "positivistic" historiographies and analytical methods; deconstructions of patriarchal, ethnocentric and other "ideological" interpretations; valorization of popular music cultures; the relativizing of differences between musical systems; and so on. On this level, the new approaches all stand for the proposition that *culture matters*, and that therefore any attempts to study music without situating it culturally are illegitimate (and probably self-interested).

Still, even on this level, some might be tempted to ask what all the fuss is about. Surely this battle has been won. Does anyone still believe that musicology is the study of the scores of the great masters and nothing more? Aren't we all, to a greater or lesser extent, culturalists now? Well actually, the buzz of the new apparent at conferences, in journals and publishers' lists, and in certain university departments masks a rather slow rate of change, together with innumerable tactical adjustments in the academy at large designed to mask conservatism with the minimal accommodation possible. There is still plenty to fight for. Indeed, not only is the small proportion of academic posts allocated to specialists in ethnomusicology or popular music indicative of this conservatism, it is all too clear that the pace of this accommodation is much slower than the speed with which these disciplines are transforming themselves.

But in any case, to locate the battle on this terrain is to succumb to the parochialism of much of the old musicology itself. A tendency to treat the category of "culture" as transparent and universal, and therefore its accommodation as purely pragmatic, needs to be brought up against its historicity: as Francis Mulhern (2000, xiii) has pointed out, "culture" is a *topic*, and, as one of the most successful topics of late-modern discourse, has assumed the status of a commonplace—one of "those places in discourse in which an entire group meets and recognises itself" (Bourdieu 1993b, 168). It is this dimension of the commonsensical that explains how culture can so often still be taken for granted; to advance the debate, to win the battle, eventually perhaps to reconfigure the field, demands as a minimum the recognition that an introduction to the cultural study of music should be *critical*—and a useful starting point is the awareness that the concepts of both "culture" and "critique," in their recognizable modern meanings, emerged concurrently in the moment of the European Enlightenment.

Previously, the discourse of culture had metaphorically linked the cultivation of mind and of ground: the culturing of inner and outer nature, through education on the one hand and by farmers on the other, formed a

coherent conceptual field. But, while many ramifications of this metaphor have survived, in the late eighteenth century—in England and especially in Germany—the idea of "culture" took on a more politicized edge: it assumed the role of critique (*Kulturkritik*, as the Germans put it), posed against the contemporary concept (typically French) of *civilization*. "Culture" now stood for inward, spiritual qualities, a wholeness of life, as against the apparently external, mechanical, alienating characteristics of Enlightenment democracy, in the emergent phase of industrial capitalism. This new culture concept soon split into divergent tendencies. The humanistic proposition of a universal measure of value ("the best which has been thought and said in the world . . . the study of perfection," in Matthew Arnold's words of 1869 [1993, 6, 11]) was one, and it possessed a distinct moral dimension: right thinking led to right living. But this perspective could be narrowed to a focus on culture as art—the best art, naturally, the art of an elite—or, in a later variant, to the sphere of meaning as such, the symbolic order. A third tendency—the *völkisch* turn—began with Herder's equation of cultures (plural rather than singular) with distinctive ways of life, each embodying a national soul; in this approach, a people "has a culture," and its value is incommensurate with any other. It is easy to recognize the influence of this view on the development of the discipline of cultural anthropology and on early ethnomusicology, but it also fed into many strands of cultural studies.

These three tendencies have competed, interacted, and mutated. That story has been told many times, classically by Raymond Williams (1961, 1965, 1981), and in recent books by (among others), Adam Kuper (1999), Terry Eagleton (2000), and Francis Mulhern (2000). It does not need repeating here. It is worth drawing attention, though, to a few of the most important features; these take the form of continuities on the one hand, and contradictions on the other.

The continuities arise precisely from the culture concept's historicity. Culture may, in one sense, be a universal attribute of humankind, but we cannot escape the specific provenance of culture theory and its historical development. In the tradition this development represents, culture always has a political force (even when it is posed as antipolitical); indeed, it often threatens to absorb or displace the sphere of politics as more conventionally understood. In part this is because culture functions as an other: it "is always defined in opposition to something else" (Kuper 1999, 14)—economics, society, psychology, biology—and its representations have their roots elsewhere: in a golden past, in a utopian future, in the captivating

unfamiliarity of "primitive" societies, of the "folk," the "people," the anthropologically *different.* It is defined, too, in opposition to Nature: Culture is what is learned, what is cultivated; it is just what is not in the genes, and culture theories have figured in a long-standing critical relationship not only with raciologies of various sorts but also with more reputable disciplines of evolutionist anthropology, social Darwinism and, today, evolutionary psychology. At the same time, culture can seem "natural"; and indeed, the organic metaphor—good culture as wholeness and health—has a strong presence in much of the theory. Terry Eagleton has worked hard to close this gap: "If culture really does go all the way down, then it seems to play just the same role as nature, and feels just as natural to us"; but this coherence is deceptive: "what is peculiar about a symbol-making creature is that it is of its nature to transcend itself. . . . It is not that culture is our nature, but that it is *of* our nature, which makes our life difficult. . . . Culture is the 'supplement' which plugs a gap at the heart of our nature, and our material needs are then reinflected in its terms. . . . Human nature is naturally unnatural, overflowing the measure simply by virtue of what it is." (Eagleton 2000, 94, 97, 99, 101) The gap, then, is inescapable—indeed "natural." But its representations, in such formulations as these, are historically specific—part of the history of the theory; and the tension between nature and culture is part of a broader crisis of knowledge. If the culture idea—from Vico through Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud to Sartre, Williams, and Habermas—is a secular theory of man's self-making, then it carries along with it an inevitable strand of reflexivity that ensures that it will always fall short of what it claims. Eagleton again: "What is it that connects culture as utopian critique, culture as way of life and culture as artistic creation?" (20). The answer is that all are responses to "the failure of culture as actual civilisation—as the grand narrative of human self-development" (23); "culture in this sense arises when civilisation begins to seem self-contradictory. . . . Our very notion of culture thus rests on a peculiarly modern alienation of the social from the economic, meaning from material life. . . . It [culture] is itself the illness to which it proposes a cure" (31).

To even glance at the continuities within culture theories is thus to find the contradictions also flooding out. There is a strong strand right across the theories emphasizing culture as the sphere of meaning, of collective symbolic discourse, webs of significance, processes of signification; culture in this view is the dimension in which humans interpret their activities, institutions, and beliefs to themselves. Yet an equally strong tradition

emphasizes that, far from being just a commentary, culture is *everything*. Thus, Raymond Williams, who talked often of culture in terms that focused on signifying practices, "meaning-bearing activity in all its forms" (Mulhern 2000, xiii), nevertheless offered as his considered formula for a theory of culture "a theory of relations between elements in a whole way of life" (Williams 1961, 12). In a reciprocal tension, cultural anthropology, while never forgetting Tylor's classic definition—"the complex whole" (1871, 1)—has also, particularly since the 1950s, followed Talcott Parsons's narrower perspective in claiming the study of collective consciousness as the specific province for the discipline, alongside and by contrast with the different arenas policed by sociology, economics, and psychology; and indeed the "hermeneutic turn" evident in the work of many of Parsons's successors in American anthropology—from Geertz to Clifford—further extends the idea of culture as a "text," and sidelines these other arenas almost completely. There are many variants of this tension. It can be written in terms of a distinction between culture as *practice* (e.g., Bourdieu 1977) and culture as the sphere of *subjectivity*, of identity formation (e.g., Bhabha 1994; Morley and Chen 1996). Or it can be figured through the picture of culture as a specific sector or subsystem in a complex set of relationships with other systems—this is Parsons's view, but an even more influential theory is of course that associated with Marx, in contrast with the idea that culture is more of a register, a level of thought and discourse applicable to all social spheres: this is the thrust of the later Williams's cultural materialism, neatly encapsulated by Stuart Hall—"Culture is not *a* practice. . . . It is threaded through *all* social practices, and is the sum of their interrelationship" (Hall 1980, 59).

Other significant contradictions within the nexus of culture theories often relate to, but sometimes cut across, this one. Is culture a human universal, and if so, is it ethically or aesthetically normative or merely a capacity that is ontologically given? Alternatively, can culture only be thought of relative to history, place, and context, and if so, are cultures radically noncomparable? If the latter is the case, judgment across boundaries—which, in today's fragmented, fluid societies, can be quite localized—would seem to be ruled out, let alone general projects of human emancipation. But if culture is taken to be a putative substantive universal, it is hard to avoid the elitism of Arnold, T. S. Eliot, and other proponents of traditional *Kulturkritik*. Should culture be seen, then, as making any sort of claim to special or specialist value or ambition, or is it, in Williams's telling word, radically *ordinary*, the property of everyman (and

woman)? A final question (final for now) might be this: If culture is learned, and if, especially, it is seen as providing in today's world the mechanisms for ever-mutable self-identifications, does this mean that it is entirely "performative"? Or is there, still, any sense in which culture can be regarded as authentic (or not)—as "true (or not) to . . . (something)"? Part of the price paid for the seeming triumph of the culture idea is the difficulty this leaves in specifying that "something."

With these questions, the political dimension of the culture idea emerges clearly. Mulhern has, intriguingly, connected the apparently different traditions of European (initially German) *Kulturkritik* and Anglophone cultural studies, the leftist, relativistic populism of the second acting, it would seem, as a radical critique of the elitist universalism of the first. What links them, he argues, is their displacement or absorption of "real" politics: they offer an alternative locus of authority, which acts as "a 'magical solution' to the poverty of politics in bourgeois society" (2000, 168), providing "a symbolic metapolitical resolution of the contradictions of capitalist modernity" (169). From distinct viewpoints, both Eagleton (2000) and Kuper (1999) also note the overweening status of culture in contemporary understanding and explanation, attacking the tendency to reduce issues to a purely cultural level, and often an especially localist, relativistic cultural level at that. All three writers call for a greater modesty on the part of culture theorists, a recognition that culture is not all there is. For Kuper, "unless we separate out the various processes that are lumped together under the heading of culture, and then look beyond the field of culture to other processes, we will not get far in understanding any of it" (1999, 247).

Such issues are particularly pressing at the present moment. "Identity politics" have inscribed cultural claims and sufferings as primary weapons of struggle, in ways that can as easily have reactionary as progressive outcomes. The culture wars in the academy, especially in the United States, have positioned elitists against populists. But, as Eagleton points out (2000, chapter 3), they function as a rather provincial proxy for broader conflicts: between concepts of culture as civility, as identity, and as commerce; and on the global level, between a singular culture standing, in mystificatory fashion, for a hegemonic new world order and a host of threatened little worlds and neglected or threatening outlooks and problems. After September 11, 2001, Samuel Huntington's prophecy that henceforth "the great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural" (quoted, Kuper 1999, 3) took on a

particularly terrifying quality as the reduction of political, economic, and social difference (not to say injustice) to culture tout court assumed official status. To resist such facile culturalism is a *political* imperative; lives depend on it. And even if, heeding the call for modesty, we acknowledge the limited power of music scholars to change the world, it remains important to note the degree of congruence between the writers I have cited, which suggests that an important turn in conceptions of the culture idea may be in progress. If we take a fresh look at the cultural inscription of music—where necessary, "disaggregating" spheres, to use Kuper's word, and reconfiguring relationships—we may both improve our understanding of culture, and clear some room for politics, both "real" and "cultural" politics. We may also, who knows, happen upon a new paradigm for the cultural study of music.

The contents of this book could in one sense certainly be seen as congruent with a policy of disaggregation. The editors proposed no particular concept of culture and no line was laid down. Our strongest suggestion to authors was that they write polemical essays, placing the stress at least as much on where music studies might (or ought to) be heading as on summaries of work done on their topic to date.

Part I addresses the music–culture question but by circling around it, from a variety of perspectives involving a range of disciplinary standpoints, intersections, and themes. Tellingly perhaps, we did initially plan a chapter that would consider the question head on (music and culture, music in culture, music as culture, etc.) but failed to recruit an author willing to take it on; we eventually accepted the point that this might be a gap worth leaving. This part of the book takes the shape, then, of a debate between different concepts not only of music and culture but also of society and history, and their possible interrelationships. In Part II the treatment becomes even more specific, each component chapter being oriented around a key issue or debate; the list makes no claim to comprehensiveness, but rather is generated by topical urgency.

The choice of chapter subjects was not just pragmatic, however. They emerged out of our own understandings of where the key issues are currently located. And indeed, a striking quality in the completed book is the extent to which a cluster of overarching themes, many of them already identified in this Introduction, appears.

This is of course not to prescribe any particular reading strategy. Part of the condition of writing or editing any book is that, happily enough,

one has no control over the ways in which it will be read and discussed. In preparing this volume, nonetheless, we had it in mind to facilitate certain kinds of usage. Thus, it should be suitable for use not only in university teaching at master's or final-year undergraduate level, but also accessible to readers outside the academic establishment (hence, for instance, the almost complete absence of footnotes and the inclusion of a list of further reading at the end of each chapter); and it should be accessible not only to musicians, but also to anyone interested in the ways in which cultural approaches have been, and can be, applied to music (no author relies on music notation in developing his or her argument). The simplicity of the two-part structure is partly in recognition of the fact that it can be read other than cover-to-cover: In fact, for many purposes (including, but not limited to, university seminars) readers will find it useful to read, successively, two or more chapters dealing with closely related topics (such as the clusters mentioned below). The arguments will sometimes be mutually reinforcing and sometimes contradictory—they do not serve some overbearing model of the relationship between music and culture so much as reveal a patchwork of distinct, but also overlapping and complementary, conceptions of that relationship.

Many contributors are concerned with the central cultural theory category of *meaning*. This is of course particularly true of Lawrence Kramer's chapter on hermeneutics, in which he emphasizes the inescapability of music's discursive construction, a topic approached from a different angle by Martin Clayton; but the issue appears in a variety of forms elsewhere, from discussions (and critiques) of homology theories by John Shepherd and Ian Biddle to Kevin Dawe's account of musical instruments as sites of meaning production, from Ruth Finnegan's emphasis on the role of emotion to the wider-ranging theory of "affordance" utilized by Eric Clarke and Nicola Dibben. Jason Toynbee puts forward, and Richard Middleton exemplifies, a notion of musical meaning as produced by "ensembles of coded voices"; but otherwise, it is striking that rigorous semiotic theories popular some years ago have become much less central. More visible—and indeed more urgently discussed currently—is an interest in the connection of meaning construction with the production of *subjectivity* and *identity*. Simon Frith's description of how users employ music as a "technology of self," balanced by Nicholas Cook's account of how identity emerges through performance, should be mentioned here, in addition to authors already named, and we should note the suggestion that identity is often not unitary but fragmented, as

emphasized, for instance, by psychoanalytic theorists such as Jacques Lacan, drawn upon by both Middleton and Biddle. The domain of *listening*, or, to use the language of cultural studies, *consumption*, is often a privileged sphere for that discipline, and receives considerable attention here. Frith, Clarke, Dibben, and Finnegan all lay stress on the importance of "ordinary," "everyday" listening and vernacular interpretation, but there is more emphasis on perceptual and affective levels of response than is often the case; Clayton addresses the relationship between such vernacular interpretation and "expert" discourses. The other side of this debate, of course, is constituted by *text* and/or *performance*. Jeff Todd Titon carries Geertz's textualism and his strategy of "thick description" even further than its originator, arguing for the multivoiced quality of all cultural texts, while Kramer construes musical texts, more conventionally defined, as always sites for discursive elaboration—or "constructive description," as he terms it. Cook presents performances not as texts but as scripts, which structure social contexts and meanings; Ian Cross sees the human infant as primed for interactive musical behavior, a state with adaptive evolutionary value; and Ian Biddle describes the "performativity" of music and of our representations of it as offering important cultural resources through which other dimensions of subjectivity, such as gender and sexuality, can be performed out. Both Cook and Kramer, and also Antoine Hennion, regard the apparent *autonomy* of musical works making up the Western musical canon, and the disengaged listening practices recommended for their appreciation, as atypical and highly historically contingent cases. Gary Tomlinson suggests that the emergence of the category of autonomous instrumental music was responsible for the discipline split between music anthropology and music history, previously part of a relatively holistic focus on the semantically rich, culturally embedded category of song. But Hennion insists that the specificity of aesthetic experience is irreducible, and similarly, David Clarke, while by no means blind to the contingent and ideological claims of autonomy, argues for a sense of its variegated dispersal across a range of repertories, and the utopian potential of this dispersal, not least in the context of the means–end rationality to which musical meaning is often reduced in commodity culture.

A characteristic figure in contemporary discussions of musical repertoires, identities, and meaning effects is that of dialogue or alterity: musical subjects are defined in relation to their *Others*. For Tomlinson, as we have seen, autonomous art music arose as a subject of history, in contrast