

John Street

*Music*  
**POLITICS**



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*For Marian*

# Music and Politics

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JOHN STREET

polity



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‘Breaking the silence: music’s role in political thought and action’, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 10(3), 2007, 321–37;

‘The pop star as politicians: from Belafonte to Bono, from creativity to conscience’, in Ian Peddie (ed.) *The Resisting Music: Popular Music and Social Protest*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, pp. 49–61;

‘Showbusiness of a serious kind: a cultural politics of arts prizes’, *Media, Culture and Society*, 27(6), 2005, 819–40;

‘“This is your Woodstock”’: popular memories and political myths’, in Andy Bennett (ed.) *Remembering Woodstock*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004, pp. 29–42;

‘Celebrity politicians: popular culture and political representation’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 6(4), 2004, 435–52.

## ***Introduction: making connections***

This book is about the politics of music, and about the music of politics. Its title makes this clear, but the connection between music and politics is less simple than it may appear. Confusion stems from the thought that music and politics are two discrete realms of human experience and endeavour. One is concerned with the organization of public life; the other with the creative use of sound and the appreciation of its beauties and meanings. And insofar as the two are linked, in, say, the protest song or in the censorship of music, one sees music intervening in politics, the other politics in music. The two realms remain recognizably distinct, and our interest or curiosity is how they respond to each other. We ask about how music can help to influence political thoughts and actions, and what censorship reveals about the powers and paranoias of states and political regimes. These are important questions, and much can be learnt from answering them. And indeed I address them in this book, but they do not go to the heart of its concerns.

What I want to argue is that they are not to be seen as separate entities whose worlds collide only occasionally, but rather are extensions of each other. I would like to persuade readers that music *embodies* political values and experiences, and *organizes* our response to society as political thought and action. Music does not just provide a vehicle of political expression, it *is* that expression. And, furthermore, states organize us through their management of music and sound more generally. The boundaries between the two realms of music and politics, I will try to suggest, are largely illusionary.

This is not an entirely new argument, but it is a neglected one. It was a common-place in Ancient Athens, and it could be detected in the eighteenth-century writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. More recently, it can be detected in the work of Theodor Adorno and Jacques Attali (1985: 3); the latter boldly announces: 'For twenty-five centuries, Western knowledge has tried to look upon the world. It has failed to understand that the world is not for beholding. It is for hearing. It is not legible, but audible.' Such claims, though, have been largely overlooked or dismissed by those who study politics, and some who study music. And even if the connections are recognized, and these old habits of thought not lost, their implications have not been fully realized. *Music and Politics* is my attempt to spell out these implications and the possibilities they represent for understanding the relationship between music and governance, between music and thought and action. Before delving further into this argument, I want to illustrate the thinking behind it with some examples.

## **The case of Simon Bikindi**

In July 2006, I received a letter from someone called Wilfred Nderitu. Mr Nderitu, it turned out, was a lawyer. He wanted to know if I would act as an expert witness in a trial for which he was representing the defendant. His client was called Simon Bikindi and he was due to appear before the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. Bikindi was charged with 'direct and public incitement to commit genocide'. The letter explained that Bikindi was a musician, and the UN prosecutors had indicted him because they believed that his songs had contributed directly to the slaughter of Tutsis. His songs were held to have been written with the deliberate intent of inflaming Hutu hatred of their Tutsi neighbours. The UN charged that specific songs

composed by Simon Bikindi had a direct effect upon those who heard them.

Mr Nderitu rang me to discuss the case, but, to my considerable relief, nothing came of this conversation. It was not immediately obvious what kind of expertise (if any) I could possibly bring to such a trial, and I think Bikindi's lawyer shared this view.

The prosecution of those responsible for the mass murders in Rwanda was clearly right, but so too was it right that they have a fair trial. There was the question, a very real one in this case, about whether songs - melodies, rhythms and lyrics - could be the source of genocidal acts. My own immediate thought had been that this was, at best, unlikely. Although the history of music is littered with instances in which politicians and other guardians of public morality have decried the effects of music on people's behaviour, much conventional academic wisdom held that such effects were more imagined than real, a product of ideology, rather than reality. Research, insofar as there was any, suggested that there was no direct causal chain between songs and social action. Bikindi's trial did address this very issue. There were arguments about what his songs actually said, what messages they might be held to contain, about how often they were played on national radio in Rwanda, and what effects they might have had. Expert evidence was heard on both sides.

The UN International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda sentenced Bikindi to prison for fifteen years for incitement to commit genocide. But significantly this decision was based on a speech he made to Hutus in June 1994 in which he demonized the Tutsis and called for their extermination. The Tribunal dismissed the charge that, through his songs, he instigated violence, in part because the songs were written before 1994 and in part because there was no direct evidence to support the claim that Bikindi had any part in

their being played on the radio during the fighting. It might seem that the court took the view that songs were of no consequence. But that does not seem to be the right conclusion. Had Bikindi sung rather than spoken the sentiments he expressed at the meeting in June 1994, then he might well have been found equally guilty. And in any case, the court did not rule, as far as I can tell, that the songs on the radio had no effect, but rather that Bikindi was not to be held responsible for the fact that they were played and for whatever effect they might have had.

Although the Bikindi example is rare and exceptional, it is not unique, as Bruce Johnson and Martin Cloonan (2009) make abundantly clear in their book *Dark Side of the Tune: Popular Music and Violence*. They provide chilling documentation of music's involvement in torture and other forms of violence. The question of music's power, for good or ill, does not go away. Following the murder of the South African white supremacist Eugene Terre'Blanche in April 2010, attention focused on the song 'Ayesaba Amagwala' [The Cowards are Scared], which contained the line 'shoot the Boer (dubul' ibhunu)'. Earlier in the year, the Constitutional Court had ruled that the South African Broadcasting Corporation should not play it on the radio (*Mail and Guardian online*, 27 March 2010). Such songs, the judges ruled, when sung at ANC rallies, were an incitement to hatred and violence.

Our feelings about these examples are, I think, revealing of more general attitudes about the way music affects people. We may be wary of crude claims of cause and effect, but we are wary too of suggestions that the art we value leaves no mark - or that the art we hate is not in some way harmful.

## **The Taliban: silence and power**

When the Taliban were driven from power in Afghanistan in 2002, the Western media represented the event with photographs of citizens waving cassette players and radios. Journalists reported the liberation of Kabul in terms of the noise now to be heard. Freedom was symbolized in sound, in the opportunity to play the music that the Taliban had banned. For the journalists and sub-editors, the power of the Taliban, and their ruthlessness in exercising it, was captured in the silence imposed on the Afghan people.

Of course, the true story is more complex than this. The Taliban were by no means the first political leaders to regard music with suspicion. Quakers and Trappists have long placed a great value on silence (Sim, 2007: 63ff). The Russian Orthodox Church, according to Tim Blanning (2008: 292), banned instrumental music in the eighteenth century 'because it adopted an exclusive and literal interpretation of the last line of Psalm 150: "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord" '. In her book *Dancing in the Streets*, Barbara Ehrenreich (2007: 97-102) places the Russian church in a tradition that saw the alliance of state and religion operating to deny all kinds of public festivity, from singing to football.

The ban on music was one of the first edicts issued by the Taliban on their accession to power in Afghanistan in September 1996. To ignore the order was to risk imprisonment. If music was played at weddings, the head of the family was liable to arrest and punishment (Baily, 2004; Majrooh, 1998; Yusufzai, 1998). Radio Kabul became Radio *Sharia*, and the output, 'once a comparatively urbane mix of international news, Asian pop, health advice and topical soap operas, was immediately replaced with bulletins of Taliban victories, religious homilies or fresh directives on how citizens should comport themselves' (Griffin, 2001: 6). Not all forms of what might be recognized as music were, in fact, banned. Forms of chanting remained as part of

religious practice. And importantly, the Taliban's strictures owed more to their politics than to any widely sanctioned reading of Islamic scripture. Nonetheless, the Taliban's behaviour, both in practice and in the accompanying rhetoric, yoked music to power and to freedom.

## **The House of Lords and the value of music**

Not all political interest in live music takes a malign form. In October 2004, the House of Lords, the unelected second chamber of the UK parliament, was earnestly debating the impact of the Licensing Act that had been passed the previous year. The noble lords were exercised over the impact the act had been having on live music. Defending the government and dismissing any suggestion that it sought the demise of live music, Lord Evans of Temple Guiting announced: 'the Government would like to see more live music; they are doing everything they can to encourage this, and we are working to that end' (House of Lords, 13 October 2004). Within the rarefied setting of the Palace of Westminster, Her Majesty's Government appeared to be offering its unqualified support for the live performance of music. When the same issue returned to the Lords in 2011, the Peers once again voted for the need to protect live music. Lord Redesdale was moved to declare, 'I believe it is a human right to have unamplified music' (House of Lords, 7 March 2011). This thought, that music is connected to human rights, lies at the heart of this book.

## **From examples to arguments**

It is easy enough, of course, to cherry pick examples and, as I did at the beginning, to make grand claims about the inseparability of politics and music. It is quite another thing

to provide a sustained argument, and this is the task to which the rest of the book is devoted. The examples above are merely indicative of the kind of connections I have in mind.

In her book *Music in Everyday Life*, Tia DeNora makes a bold claim. Music, she contends, forges a relationship between 'the polis, the citizen and the configuration of consciousness'. 'Music', she goes on, 'is much more than a decorative art ... It is a powerful medium of social order' (2000: 163). In illustrating this power she refers to the way muzak can be used to control an environment and the behaviour that takes place within it. But DeNora does not see music simply as a tool of control and oppression. It can also, she says, act to constitute identities and to articulate emotions that empower people. Frustratingly, as Simon Frith (2003: 45) has noted, DeNora's claims for music's political purpose appear on the final pages of her book. The reader is left to wonder about how such ideas might be grounded. What does it mean to say that music is a 'medium of social order'? All music? All social orders? How can a set of sounds - however dexterously composed and performed - 'order' human thought and action? My book is intended as a response to these questions. It is an attempt to show how and why music - as organized sound - can assume such an importance in people's lives.

In chapters 1 and 2, I address the familiar conjunctions of music and politics, the first being the censorship of music, and the second being music policy. Both entail examining the ways in which states actively engage with music. But while these aspects of the link between music and politics are marked by familiarity, I want to consider their less obvious features. By this I mean, how censorship and music policy explicitly and implicitly invest music with political principles and political ideals. The chapters ask what is

meant when live music is claimed, as did Lord Redesdale, as a human right.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 develop this thought further by looking, not at how the state sees music, but how music is used and seen by citizens in the demands they make upon that state. Here the question is how music contributes to the articulation of political ideas and to the organization of political action. Using examples such as Live 8 and Rock Against Racism, these chapters argue for music as more than a mere soundtrack to politics, but as the substance of politics. They look at how music comes to represent and articulate political ideas and identities, but also how music mobilizes movements in support of such notions.

The last part of the book is devoted to delving more deeply into the connections explored in the first part. Chapter 6 considers how music marks the sense of history that informs political ideals. It is, in a sense, about how music makes history. Chapter 7 traces the connection between musical taste and political values, mapping the interplay of aesthetics and ideology. This theme continues into chapter 8 where we chart music's place in a particular tradition of political thought. It is a tradition in which music is not merely a matter of taste or entertainment, but in which it is key to our understanding of social order. The last substantive chapter draws out the further implications of this tradition for our understanding of music as a form of political experience.

## **Politics**

Before going any further, I want to make explicit what I mean by 'politics' in this context. I am conscious that there are those who argue that 'everything is political', or more modestly that 'all music is political'. There is, of course, something in both claims. Each seeks to challenge the view

that there is a 'natural order' to human affairs or that 'there is no alternative'. Each highlights the thought that in all aspects of our lives choices are being made and values being articulated. But the danger of such a perspective is that it empties 'politics' of all meaning. It becomes a truism that is deprived of any insight or leverage. It does not distinguish those activities that can affect the exercise of public power from those that cannot.

Something similar can happen in talking of the politics of music. It may be true that, in one sense or another, Beethoven's *Fidelio*, Bob Dylan's 'Blowing in the Wind' and the Wombles' 'Wombling Song' ('Underground, overground, wombling free/the Wombles of Wimbledon Common are we') are all examples of 'political' music, but how much would be gained by an analysis that lumped them together? Equally, all concerts, all music industry decisions, and all consumer choices may be 'political' in some sense, but how much do we gain by saying so?

In trying to specify more precisely what 'politics' refers to, I follow Colin Hay (2007: 65) in adopting a 'differentiated yet inclusive' definition. Hay is not alone in taking this approach. It is shared by other writers, and particularly those who are concerned with the relationship between the political and the cultural. Their starting point is, typically, to denounce the traditional definition of politics, one that confines itself to the activities of parties and governments alone (Buckingham, 2000; Nash, 2000). It is not that such agents are irrelevant to any understanding of politics, but that they are not its sole actors. It would be a strange definition of politics that excluded the activities of social movements, such as those organized round sexuality or gender or ethnicity. It would be strange too to deny the force of the feminist slogan that the 'personal is political'. In this spirit, Stephen Coleman (2007: 15) argues for an 'expansive conception of the political' which contains 'the

micro-relationships in which power is contested and negotiated within families and workplaces, amongst friends and strangers, on a daily basis’.

The danger here is that *all* aspects of the personal are treated as political, in the sense that all involve some aspect of power. David Buckingham (2000: 34) is wary of this move, arguing that such inclusivity ‘is little more than a recipe for political quietism’. Buckingham contends that the personal should be treated as political only when this reconfiguration is recognized as such by the participants. In a similar vein, we need to be wary of conflating ‘politics’ and ‘public life’. As Nick Couldry (2007) and his colleagues point out, they do not necessarily share the same contours. What is public may not automatically be political, just as what is private may not be either.

Colin Hay offers a synthesis of the elements that constitute our understanding of the political. He notes the multiple, and often contradictory, accounts of the ‘political’, accounts which distinguish between politics as a function, a process and an arena. His response is to identify four distinctive features of the political. To count as ‘political’, a situation must present people with a choice, and one which they can act upon; they must have agency. And in exercising agency, people must be able to deliberate publicly and with others and for the outcome to have an impact on others; it must be social, not personal (Hay, 2007: 65). Put simply, decisions that are taken alone and affect only the individual who takes them are not social and hence not political (Hay, 2007: 70).

What are the implications of these definitional points for the way I approach the relationship of music to politics? One answer would be that if musical pleasure and choice are purely private matters of personal consequence, they are not political. It is only when musical pleasure (or musical displeasure) spills over into the public realm and into the

exercise of power within it that it becomes political. It is where music inspires forms of collective thought and action that it becomes part of politics. It is where music forms a site of public deliberation, rather than private reflection, that we talk of music as political.

## Music

But while this book takes what, I hope, seems like a clear-eyed view of politics, and thereby allows for a more precise statement of how music and politics are connected, I do not thereby want to assume that 'music' is a self-evident category – far from it. Most of the examples I draw upon might be classed as 'popular music', but I hope that my argument is not dependent upon this particular categorization of music. The arguments advanced here can be applied to any form of music, whatever its genre.

This is not to deny the importance of music, but it is to open up the question of what sort of entity it is. This is not to invite wholesale scepticism. I do not want to deny the importance of music – and indeed all cultural forms – to the way we live. If *Music and Politics* was to have a guiding philosophy, it is provided by the novelist Carol Shields. In *Larry's Party*, she (1997: 58) writes of her eponymous hero: 'Larry listens. This is how he's learning about the world, exactly as everyone else does – from sideways comments over a lemon meringue pie, sudden bursts of comprehension or weird parallels that come curling out of the radio, out of a movie, off the pages of a newspaper, out of a joke – and his baffled self stands back and says: so this is how it works.' For Shields, Larry's world is constructed by what he *hears*, rather than what he sees. In some ways, this book is an extended footnote to this insight. What it tries to demonstrate is that how music works on us, and how we act upon music, are intimately connected to the way we think

and act politically. This is not just a claim about individuals, but about the collectivities and institutions they form. It is true for governments, parties and social movements, and the power they wield or seek to wield. It is a claim, as I have said, about the music of politics, and the politics of music.

# 1

## ***Sound barriers: censoring music***

The urge to censor music for fear of its effects is as old as music itself. Plato's concerns with the potential moral damage to be discerned in types of music marks one of the earliest recorded examples. 'The overseers', Plato (*Republic* 424b-c) is recorded as saying, 'must throughout be watchful against innovations in music and gymnastics counter to the established order, and to the best of their power guard against them.' In seventeenth-century England the performance of unlicensed ballads could lead to fines or imprisonment (Palmer, 1988: 245); in nineteenth-century Italy the librettos of all operas were subject to the censors' scrutiny (Blanning, 2008: 268). Throughout human history music has been the source of fear and the object of repression. Every century on every continent has seen those in authority - whether as church or as state - use their powers to silence certain sounds or performers.

Here are two recent examples. Under the headline 'Islamist hardliners force DJs to drop "evil" songs', *The Times* (14 April 2010) reports that: 'All 14 radio stations based in the Somali capital [Mogadishu] have complied with an ultimatum by the hardline Hezb-e-Islami militia to stop broadcasting music, according to the National Union of Somali Journalists. Songs - condemned as "evil" - were replaced with poems and jingles with random animal or vehicle noises. "We abide by their rules," said Mohamed Haji Bare, director-general of Danan radio. Those who flout the militia's brand of Islamic law are flogged in public, have limbs amputated or are executed.' Meanwhile, in the UK in

early 2010 the grime artist Giggs saw all ten dates of his tour cancelled, following advice from the Metropolitan Police, who also, it was reported, rang various record companies to discourage them from signing him to their label (Jonze, 2010). The police were worried by the kind of fans Giggs would acquire. He had served a sentence for illegal possession of a firearm. In an earlier century, music-hall and singing-saloons were similarly targeted because of the bad behaviour they attracted (Russell, 1987: 20).

Just as certainly as the censors have sought to impose their will, others have challenged their authority and their wisdom. In 1644 John Milton railed against would-be censors:

If we think to regulate Printing, thereby to rectify manners, we must regulate all recreations and pastimes, all that is delightful to man. No musick must be heard, no song be set or sung, but what is grave and *Dorick*. ... It will ask more than the work of twenty licencers to examine all the lutes, violins, and the guitars in every house. ... And who shall silence all the airs and madrigals that whisper softness in chambers?  
(<http://www.stlawrenceinstitute.org/vol14mit.html>)

More than three centuries later, *Index on Censorship* (2010) devoted a special issue to the oppressive treatment of music and musicians across the world. However powerful or persistent the voices raised in protest at censorship, the censors continue to silence sound.

Stories of censorship tell a familiar tale. They speak of an authoritarian regime whose ruthlessness is exemplified by its treatment of music. So we read of the Chinese authorities imprisoning fourteen Tibetan nuns for singing songs in support of their country's independence (*Index on Censorship*, 1998); or of their refusal to allow Bob Dylan to play in China (*NME*, 4 April 2010), a ban that was lifted in 2011, on the condition that his set-list was approved by the

Ministry of Culture (*Guardian*, 4 April 2011). We hear of a group of Turkish punk rockers who faced jail for a song 'criticizing the country's unpopular university entrance exam' (*Guardian*, 9 April 2007). These stories join those about the Taliban's blanket ban of all music in Afghanistan. Such reports reinforce the image of the states in question, but they do so by way of the value attributed to music as the object of the brutal regime's ire. In part, music stands as the epitome of freedom. Making music is regarded as a fundamental aspect of human freedom and a means by which we announce our liberty. At the same time, music stands for the trivial and inconsequential. The true terror of these censorious regimes, the stories seem to say, is embodied in the fact that their bullying extends to matters as mundane and trivial as music - as if music is not really that important, and yet it is censored.

This ambivalence offers, I think, an insight into the political complexities of the censorship of music. And in reflecting upon these, I want first to draw attention to some general patterns in the politics of censorship, before going on to consider the principles implicated in the targeting of music.

## **Background noise**

Censorship is not the exclusive preserve of a particular system of government, regime or ideology. Keith Kahn-Harris (2007: 27) has documented the fate of metal music, which, in its various guises (from heavy to thrash to extreme), has been targeted by both left-wing and right-wing groups, united in their common assumption that the music 'cannot in and of itself be worthwhile'. During the 1990s, UK Customs officials tried to prevent the importing of Swedish metal music, while the authorities in Israel, Cuba, Egypt and Syria have all taken action against fans and performers of the genre (Kahn-Harris, 2007: 28). The stated

reasons for these interventions have varied. It has been accused, for example, of promoting both Satanism and homosexuality. And it is not just state agencies who take on the guise of censor, as this story reveals:

In a stunning last-minute move, Walt Disney Properties have pressured promoter Live Nation into canceling Machine Head's performance tomorrow night at the House of Blues venue in Anaheim (on their Disneyland property). Citing violent imagery, undesirable fans and inflammatory lyrics as the reason, the diversity-impaired corporation began pressuring the promoter on Saturday to cancel all upcoming heavy metal concerts. (<http://www.roadrunnerrecords.com/BLABBERMOUTH.NET/news.aspx?mode=Article&newsitemID=80237>)

These diverse attempts at censorship of heavy metal are political in the sense either that elements of state power instigate the action or because they represent the promotion of a particular political ideology. But they are not, it seems, directed at the explicitly political content of the music. This is not to say, though, that politics too may inspire censorship.

The communications corporation AT&T was accused of censoring a webcast version of the Lollapalooza tour because of the criticism made of George W. Bush. Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder reportedly said 'George Bush, leave this world alone' and 'George Bush find yourself another home', but AT&T removed both comments from their Blue Room webcast (*LA Times* blog, 8 August 2007). The same year the band Death Cab for Cutie had their music seized by Homeland Security (*Harper's Magazine*, 19 October 2007). These instances of political censorship are not rare. Indeed, in a survey of music censorship over a twenty-year period, Vanessa Bastian and Dave Laing (2003) claim that 'politics' constitutes the main reason for censorship.