



WHY MUSIC MATTERS

DAVID HESMONDHALGH



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Music as Intimate and Social, Private and Public

Music matters because it has the potential to enrich people's lives, and enrich societies. But in what ways does it enrich them, why, and in what circumstances? Just as importantly, what constrains music from doing so? These questions, which I hope to address in this book, are big ones, and even they are only one aspect of a broader problem: the role of aesthetic experience in modern life. So my examination of the value of music draws upon wider debates about the value of art and culture in the modern world, and it also seeks to contribute to those discussions.

Music as an example of aesthetic experience raises further questions, concerning the specificity of music. What distinguishes musical practices and experiences from other artistic, cultural, and social practices? What is distinctive about music as a form of communication? These issues are addressed across the book as a whole, but in this introductory chapter I want briefly to give some indication of my particular approach to them, before outlining the essays that follow.

The fact that music matters so much to so many people may derive from two contrasting yet complementary dimensions of musical experience in modern societies. The first is that *music often feels intensely and emotionally linked to the private self*. As one writer has put it, music is a set of cultural practices that have come to be intricately bound up with the realm of the personal and the subjective (Martin, 1995: 2). This includes the way in which music provides a basis for intimate relations with others: a parent singing a child to sleep; three sisters expressing their feelings for a fourth by singing to her on her birthday; two lovers in bed hearing a song that they will forever associate with each other. The second is that *music is often the*

basis of collective, public experiences, whether in live performance, mad dancing at a party, or simply by virtue of the fact that thousands and sometimes millions of people can come to know the same sounds and performers.

These private and public dimensions of musical experience may support and reinforce each other. Our excitement or sadness at hearing a song can be intensified through the sense that such emotions in response to a particular piece of music are shared by others, or even just that they *might* be shared. This feeling can be especially strong at a live performance, but it is just as possible when seeing someone perform on television or on YouTube. Listening to music through headphones as you wait for a bus, you might, however semi-consciously and fleetingly, imagine others – a particular person, or untold thousands – being able to share that response. That sense of sharedness is one of the pleasures of pop music, and many people are suspicious of it, perhaps because the feeling of community involved may seem to derive from sentimentality or even from a loss of individuality. But communal sentiment also derives from music's capacity for enhancing experiences of collectivity, and there are reasons to value that.

Music, then, represents a remarkable meeting point of intimate and social realms. It provides a basis of self-identity (this is who I am, this is who I'm not) and collective identity (this is who we are, this is who we're not), often in the same moment. All cultural products have this potential – films, television programs, even shoes and cars. Yet music's seemingly special link to emotions and feelings makes it an especially powerful site for the bringing together of private and public experience.

This is where things start to get complicated. The relations between public and private realms have always been complex and contested. But in modern times, the private self has never been, in Eva Illouz's words, "so publicly performed and [so] harnessed to the values of the economic and public spheres" (2007: 4). It is no longer possible to sustain the idea that "private" spheres such as the home and family offer some kind of opposition to, or protection from, a world of public power, with the private understood as "warm" and intimate, and the public realm as a "cold," rational, administrative domain. Of course, many people cope with the demands of their working lives by telling themselves that their private realm offers a "haven in a heartless world" (Lasch, 1977), and arguably a number of political interests encourage this privatization of people's feelings of attachment and belonging (an argument made by, among others, Berlant, 1997). But in reality, those realms we think of as "personal" – our inner selves

internal conversations and relationships with families, lovers, and close friends – are hugely affected by the world beyond them, and can be just as troubled as the workplace (see Hochschild, 1983). This may be more so now than ever before, as powerful commercial and state institutions in advanced industrial countries increasingly require autonomy, creativity, and emotional roundedness in their employees and citizens.

So this book examines the social value of music by exploring the relationships between music, history, society, and the self. It does so by offering *a critical defense of music*. Why on earth, you might ask, would music need defending? Who could possibly be against music, other than religious fanatics and disgruntled parents? Well, a variety of people and institutions are skeptical about the relative value of artistic forms such as music compared with other social practices. I mean “artistic” here in a broad sense: the use of skills to produce works of the imagination, to invoke feelings of pleasure, beauty, shock, excitement, and so on, rather than some rarified notion of “high art.” The social value of artistic practices and experiences, like that of other potentially important things such as education, has come under attack in recent years. Some trace such attacks to the 1970s. During that decade, faced by an increasing sense of economic crisis, many politicians and commentators began to argue more strongly than ever for the view that economic prosperity should be the central goal of governments and of many other public institutions, including those involved in education, health, and culture. This was an old viewpoint, of course, and has existed in various forms since the eighteenth century. But a contemporary version of this type of thinking, often called neo-liberalism, was argued for with particular force from the 1970s onwards, and with great success (see Crouch, 2011). Government policy towards culture was increasingly guided by economic conceptions of what was best for individuals and society, and many economic approaches implicitly or explicitly assumed that the life-enhancing properties of art and culture were less important than the goal of economic prosperity. Although there have undoubtedly been strong counter-tendencies, that devaluation and implicit denigration of culture and art has continued. In the wake of the post-2008 economic crisis unleashed by the unregulated venality of the financial services and banking sectors, savage cuts were made to education, library, and arts funding in England, where I live and work, and in many other places too.

This is one very significant way in which the value of art (again, I stress that I am using this term in a broad sense), and of music, has been

questioned, and with enormous consequences for musicians and other cultural practitioners, and for ordinary people. There is, however, another way in which the value of art (and music) has been questioned, and I have much more sympathy with it. Some are skeptical not about artistic practice and experience per se, but about the particular forms that artistic practices such as music take in modern societies. A number of writers, perhaps most notably the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, have focused on the way in which divisions between “high” and “low” culture draw upon and reinforce patterns of social inequality, and on how therefore the dominant ways of thinking about beauty and pleasure in modern societies are deeply compromised. This view has merit, because there are good reasons to think that culture should not be thought of as autonomous of society, or of power relations. For example, cultural forms associated with societies in the global south are often considered less worthy than those of the global north, or, almost as bad, are elevated above them on dubious grounds. Such evaluations are surely connected to long histories of inequality and violence. Gender and class inequality infect prevailing judgments of aesthetic worth.

Recognizing the ways in which cultural practices are imbricated with social dynamics means that critics are right to be suspicious of certain ways of celebrating artistic practices and experiences. That is partly why I use the phrase *critical defense* of music, because I want to take into account the way that music is imbricated with society and the self, with all their problems.

But in some quarters, a critique of the power dynamics involved in culture has led to a strange situation. Many intellectuals who are rightly critical of existing social relations enjoy and gain enrichment from artistic and cultural experience in their own lives. They buy DVD box sets, download films and music, and discuss them heatedly with friends. They have strong opinions about the value of the particular cultural products they love. But they seem unable or unwilling in what they write and say to provide an account of how art, culture, entertainment, and knowledge might enhance people’s lives more generally, and why these domains might need defending from the kind of denigration and lack of public support that I noted earlier.

Alternatively, some intellectuals can only defend whatever they define as *popular* culture – perhaps because popularity among “ordinary” (or working-class?) people is felt to reflect an implicit democratic appeal. But such uncritical populism (McGuigan, 1992) is bad politics and bad aesthetics. It appears egalitarian, but often ends up enacting a reversal of the exclusion and snobbery involved in the preference for high culture over low

culture. It submits to notions of quality that may be determined to a large degree by powerful cultural corporations that dominate the production and dissemination of cultural goods.¹ What I want to do is provide a critical defense of music, by explaining why it matters, and to do so by looking and listening across a range of different genres and experiences, including “popular” forms, but others too.

This is an academic book, based on my own research, and drawing on research that others have carried out in a range of disciplines, mainly in the social sciences, but also in the humanities. The main ones are sociology; social and political theory; media, communication, and cultural studies; anthropology and ethnomusicology; musicology and music history; philosophy (aesthetics in particular); psychology, especially the burgeoning field of music psychology; and social history. Nevertheless, I have tried to keep my explanations as clear and as simple as possible, while staying true to the main goal of academic life: to enhance knowledge by providing a rigorous examination of difficult issues.

How then do I mount my critical defense of music in this book? In short, I investigate why music matters at the level of the individual self (Chapter 2), in our intimate relations with others (Chapter 3), in constructing and enhancing experiences of sociability and “co-present” community (Chapter 4), and in building experiences of solidarity, commonality, and publicness across space and time (Chapter 5).

Chapter 2 begins by arguing that music’s relationships to affective experience, to emotion and feeling, are distinctive and are important for music’s ability to contribute to human flourishing. I draw on the work of the feminist, neo-Aristotelian philosopher Martha Nussbaum who argues that music, like stories and play, can enhance our lives by helping us understand our emotions better, and that music communicates emotions in a particular way, and can therefore perform a distinctive ethical role in our lives. Importantly, Nussbaum’s account relies on an understanding of the self as vulnerable, which is partly derived from object–relations psychoanalysis. I then outline the concept of human flourishing, defend it against potential criticisms, and relate it to artistic and musical practice, using “the capabilities approach” to questions of human needs and social justice. Nussbaum’s

¹ I use this somewhat cumbersome phrase rather than saying “by markets” because of my view that markets are not in themselves the problem with modern society, it is the particular way that markets are organized; see Keat (2000). For fuller analysis of relations between economics and culture than is possible in the current book, see Hesmondhalgh (2013).

perspective is too centered on classical music, contemplative listening, and the cognitive aspects of emotion. It downplays other, more somatic, affective, and bodily experiences of music. So, to supplement Nussbaum's account of how music's crystallization of emotion can enhance life, I discuss the kinds of affective rewards that people might get from dancing to music, and I draw upon the philosophical tradition known as pragmatist aesthetics to understand the contribution such experiences might make to human flourishing. These include revitalization and a healthy loss of self-consciousness. (Remember my focus is on the individual here, and that collective aspects of flourishing through music are discussed in later chapters.)

I then go on to complement Nussbaum's approach further by examining one of the most important developments in social science of music over the last 20 years: a tide of analysis of "music in everyday life." This, however, is where I begin to introduce the social and psycho-social factors that might severely constrain the ways in which music enriches people's lives in modern societies (hence a *critical* defense of music, because there is much to criticize in the way the world is). I argue that the major social scientific approaches to music in everyday life, from sociology, anthropology, and psychology, overestimate people's freedom to use music, and understate ways in which music is tied up with social problems such as inequality and suffering. Another, separate problem is that some of these accounts implicitly downplay the importance of aesthetic experience by focusing excessively on uses of music as a resource for mood regulation. So in order to construct a better social scientific approach to music, centered on *music's constrained contributions to human flourishing*, I examine some problems of self-realization in modern life and their relation to music, and I look at ways in which competitive individualism – which I believe to be an important feature of modern societies – is apparent in people's relations to music. I draw on interviews that I and colleagues conducted with a number of people about their musical practices, and interpret them using critical social theory. In spite of this emphasis on critique, my overall perspective is not a pessimistic one (though it is one troubled by aspects of contemporary society and culture) and in a final section, I summarize some aspects of what I call music's *constrained enrichment* of people's individual lives.

Chapter 3 then moves beyond the individual level to people's intimate relations, and asks: what means has popular music culture provided for enhancing people's experiences of sexual love? My focus in this chapter is historical and roughly chronological, concentrating on the period from

1945 to the present, and it is genre-based, examining the prevailing ways in which particular genres encoded ideas of sex, sexuality, and gender. I confine myself in this chapter to the “mainstream” popular music genres of rock and pop in the Anglophone world, their various sub-genres, and black musical genres of soul, R&B, and hip hop. I begin by distinguishing my approach from the main ways in which questions of sex and sexuality have been approached in music studies: critical musicology’s appropriation of post-structuralist theory, and neo-Deleuzean ideas of rock as a music of bodily desire. Instead, I focus, in line with the approach developed in Chapter 2, on the affective experiences that music can help generate in ordinary life, here looking at how different genres have involved diverse configurations of emotion and feeling at discrete stages in their historical development. I listen to a range of musical examples, but the approach remains sociological in orientation, examining the ways in which sexual desire and vulnerable needs for attachment to others become institutionalized into historically changing processes of courtship, romance, and marriage.

The chapter takes the “countercultural moment” of the 1960s as pivotal and relates this to the rock/pop division that is crucial to understanding popular music culture in the late twentieth century, and which lingers today. Against notions that music is valuable because of its close links to sexual freedom, I show that a much wider range of emotions and feelings have been apparent in a great deal of popular music, not only in the lyrics to popular songs, but in the way that these emotions and feelings were embodied in music, and combined with words and images. I trace the origins of rock countercultural notions of sexual freedom in bohemianism’s view that personal sexuality is compromised by convention. In doing so, I criticize some major ways in which those notions of sexual freedom were articulated, but I also criticize conservative thinking. What we need, I argue, is a conception of the ordinary pleasures of music in relation to sex and love. (Here, as throughout the book as a whole, my argument shows the influence of certain versions of cultural studies, most notably the kind of respect for “ordinary” and working-class experience apparent in the work of writers such as Raymond Williams.) Against rock’s rejection of various genres for their lack of authenticity, I show that much (though by no means all) post-war popular music made available a rich commentary on questions of sex, romance, and intimacy – and “commentary” here includes the articulation of emotion and feeling through musical sound. I show this mainly through a defense of popular music’s relations to sex and love. This

includes consideration of recent pop music that has been lambasted in the media for its sexual explicitness, and scrutiny of debates about hip hop's supposed misogyny. This is no populist celebration of pop however. Pop music has reflected, and constituted, troubling aspects of modern culture: misogyny, narcissism, and excessive sentimentality. We would flourish through music more, I argue, if music addressed a wider variety of emotional contexts and psychic dynamics. The ambivalence of music's ability to contribute to human flourishing is therefore re-emphasized.

Chapters 4 and 5 turn to the question of how we might flourish *together* in modern societies. Chapter 4 focuses on co-present sociability and publicness, and also the related question of locality (which is a kind of extended co-presence). The guiding question is as follows: how might music enhance collective experience among people who share the same space? I begin the discussion by analyzing the work of three writers who have made important contributions to understanding music's relationships to community and social life. In particular, they offer ways of understanding the social value of musical participation. I argue, however, that each of these writers seeks a notion of community that is not feasible under conditions of capitalist modernity, and is unlikely to be recoverable in complex modern societies, even in more equal and emancipated ones. Christopher Small underestimates the ways in which the Afro-diasporic forms he values are a product of modernity, and he assumes that musical practices directly reflect the fundamental features of the societies from which they derive. Charles Keil draws too strong a line between participations that "revitalize, equalize and decentralize" (Keil, 1994/1966: 98) and negative forms, underestimating ambivalence. He bases his views of participation on a Freudo-Marxian politics that is too optimistic about human psychology and too pessimistic about modern societies. Finally, Thomas Turino shows such a deep yearning for experiences of (comm)unity that he finds valuable forms of musical practice only in restricted pockets of modern life. My claim, in response to these authors, is that we need to look for beneficial experiences of sociability in life as it is currently lived, and not aspire to impossible levels of communality. For this reason, I then turn to accounts of the pleasurable and life-enriching sociality people experience when they sing together, dance together, and play music together in modern societies. There is, I argue, considerable evidence of rich music-related sociability that should not be overlooked in a quest for ideal forms of communal existence. If music is already, here and now, providing such experiences, though in constrained ways, how might we theorize music's continuing ability to enhance sociality

and sociability in ordinary life, even amidst sometimes appalling and often troubling circumstances? I offer three routes (noting limitations where appropriate): phenomenological sociology's attention to the way in which music offers shared experiences of time; ideas from anthropology and Durkheimian sociology concerning a primal need in humans for intense experiences of collectivity; and the capabilities approach discussed in Chapter 2, which emphasizes human needs for affiliation, and our interdependence and shared vulnerability. The capabilities approach has the advantage of directing our attention to questions of social justice, and of encouraging accounts of how some social and institutional arrangements might be more effective than others in enhancing music's contribution to social life. In line with this focus on social justice, I discuss the way in which social class inhibits access to the benefits of amateur music-making; examine what conditions might allow particular cities or towns to develop as thriving musical places; and, finally, discuss how cultural production in capitalist modernity distorts musical labor markets, allowing a certain musical diversity, but inhibiting people's chances to make a living out of music-making, other than a lucky few.

Chapter 5 moves away from co-present forms of sociality and publicness to mediated ones. It addresses the role that aesthetic experience and musical experience might play in establishing relations of commonality in complex modern societies. The chapter moves from philosophy and the history of ideas to more concrete and sociologically informed case studies. I begin by discussing post-Enlightenment hopes that aesthetic experience might establish a basis for people to live together peacefully, across different communities. Such thinking has been thoroughly critiqued by Marxists, post-structuralists, and social scientists. In order to defend aesthetic experience, there have recently been some efforts to reconstruct an emancipatory conception of aesthetic experience based on commonality across different communities. Clearly, such efforts are relevant to a consideration of the value of aesthetic experience, and of music. However, from my perspective, these efforts (e.g., by Rancière and Garnham) lack concreteness and an adequate attention to the institutions that sustain publicness. So, to explore how we might construct better understandings of music's contribution to a commonality that valuably transcends social difference (rather than violently suppresses or dismisses it), I make a number of moves. First of all, given that emancipatory conceptions of the aesthetic are often understood as being based upon the value of aesthetic deliberation, or at least reflection, I examine some of the ways in which people talk about why they

value music. The problem though is that the value of aesthetic experience is not at all easily captured by language. So I make a second move: to consider the idea that music's most valuable contribution to collective human life might be to advance political struggles for a better distribution of flourishing. My claim is that music's most significant effects on the world are not directly political, in the sense of contributing to forms of publicness that involve deliberation, or that advance political struggle, but instead relate to the sustenance of a public sociability, which keeps alive feelings of solidarity and community. In this and in other ways too, musical culture develops values and identities that feed into deliberation, democracy, and politics in substantial but rather indirect ways.

The rest of the chapter then concretizes the discussion of aesthetics, commonality, and publicness by looking at a number of case studies, concentrating on different forms of musical collectivity. First of all, I examine collectivities based on shared enjoyment of particular genres (such as extreme metal) and star performers. Although not without significance and value, I argue, such musical collectivities offer too fragmented a means of assessing music's relation to collective human flourishing. It is to the crucial institution of the nation that we must turn for evidence of how musical-aesthetic experience might fare in terms of enhancing meaningful community across space and time. I examine case studies of various relations between music and identity in modern nations, concentrating on questions of nationalism and cosmopolitanism. I criticize an account that finds significant musical cosmopolitanism in international flows of rock music. I find hope for music's ability to transcend difference in the perhaps surprising context of Afghanistan. Latin America provides a number of examples of where music associated with marginalized ethnic and class groups came to be identified as "national" music. Turkey offers a striking example of music's ability, in the right institutional circumstances, to bridge differences of religion and sexuality. Finally, and more pessimistically, drawing on the work of Paul Gilroy, I discuss how the inspiring cosmopolitanism of Afro-diasporic music has been affected by commercialization and globalization in the neo-liberal era. Music's ability to unite people across space and time, and thereby enable their collective flourishing, I conclude, is real, but specific, and highly vulnerable to systemic changes, such as increasing consumerism, commodification, and competitiveness. A final section briefly rehearses the perspective of the book as a whole.

Feeling and Flourishing

2.1 Music, Affect, Emotion

Nearly everyone agrees that music is a cultural form that has strong connections to emotions, feelings, and moods: the realm of affect. It is not surprising then that for hundreds of years considerable attention has been paid to the relations between music and affect. Here I briefly examine approaches from philosophical aesthetics, cultural theory, and psychology in order to contextualize my own approach, which, as I made clear in Chapter 1, examines music's capacity to enrich our lives via the feelings and emotions it engenders, and the limits of this capacity in modern societies.

Debates in philosophical aesthetics have centered on issues such as how music, as a non-sentient object, can possibly "express" emotion; on understanding how listeners might be able to feel emotions that mirror those expressed in music, such as feeling sadness in response to sad music, when they lack the beliefs that usually go with emotions such as sadness; and on why listeners would seek out negative emotions such as sadness in music.¹ These are intellectually interesting questions but they often seem far removed from the questions of value and experience that are central to my approach in this book. Philosopher Kathleen Marie Higgins (2011) has shown how, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, serious aesthetic

¹ See Davies (2010) who provides a helpful summary of philosophical theories of music and emotion. Musicologists have recently turned their attention to emotion (see Spitzer, 2009), but the shadows of formalism and structuralism, discussed later in this paragraph, still loom. See also Cook and Dibben (2010) for a good survey of musicological approaches to music and emotion.

thought moved away from earlier concerns with values and ethics, and she attributes this drift to the rise of a type of aesthetics that was centered on the question of how form creates beauty: a formalism derived from Kantian aesthetics and shaped by the concerns of the nineteenth-century German writer Hanslick with musical structure. Higgins outlines three predominant historical Western explanations of the relationship between music and emotion: that music *imitates* or *represents* emotions, that it *arouses* them, and that it *expresses* them (the first two of these have often overlapped and interacted). For ancient and medieval thinkers, relations between music and feelings were understood as strongly intersubjective, and with significant ethical implications. Imitation theory, for example, emphasized music's profound impact on character and on society; medieval arousal theorists such as Augustine emphasized the mixed blessings of music's appeal to the emotions, in terms of its ability to foster virtue or vice. Higgins shows how, from the eighteenth century onwards, especially under the influence of Kantian forms of formalist structural analysis, understandings of musical emotion lost this connection to ethics and intersubjectivity. Imitation, arousal, and expression theory were all revived in the twentieth century, but on formalist terms. Oriented towards analytical precision, the primary interest was in how the formal structure of music afforded emotions. For Higgins, the roles of "context" and "association" of meaning in producing emotions in listeners were sidelined. Even where association and context were discussed, as in musicologist Leonard Meyer's highly influential *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (1957), they were generally treated as an afterthought to questions of structure. Association and context were overshadowed by analysis of structural arousals of anticipation and deferral, and affective responses were often undifferentiated.

Higgins provides a philosophical account of musical affect which emphasizes its value in enriching people's lives, and in particular how people might live their lives together.² In this respect, she provides a corrective to dominant trends in philosophical aesthetics of music and in musicology. Her approach, and that of other writers who seek to reconnect affect with ethics, intersubjectivity, and value (see following text), also suggests some limitations of

² I think that Higgins is too optimistic about music's ability to transcend the limitations of the societies that produce it, a fault her excellent book shares with other writers that I discuss later. Also, I use Nussbaum's account of music and emotion, rather than Higgins', because I find the former's psychoanalytically informed model richer, and more able to address the complexity of human subjectivity.

the recent “affective turn” in cultural theory. Theorists of culture and affect have usefully pointed beyond the limitations of an excessive focus on signification, meaning, and discourse (apparent in media and cultural studies) towards the complex bodily effects of cultural experience.³ The affective turn in cultural theory has the benefit of recognizing that sensations, moods, and feelings are a key part of cultural experience alongside emotion, and that there are important somatic dimensions to affect. This is good, because responses to culture should not be treated primarily as a matter of intellectual interpretation and evaluation. However, some affective cultural theorists are too inclined to dismiss emotion as a category of affect. For example, some researchers influenced by Deleuze differentiate affect, defined hazily as a “pre-personal intensity,” from emotion as something “owned and recognised” (Massumi, 1995: 84). The implication is that emotion is a category primarily of interest to liberal-humanist conceptions of subjectivity, which need to be transcended. In my view, neither humanism nor emotion, nor the rich history of thinking about affect in philosophy, should be dismissed quite as easily as that. Emotions matter, in part because they potentially provide appraisals of our situation in life – they are linked in complex, opaque but important ways to ethics and intersubjectivity.

From a very different standpoint from cultural theory, music psychology has also indicated the very wide range of affective experiences that people in modern societies have in relation to music. In order to understand musical affect, some psychologists and other writers have paid special attention to strong emotional experiences. Undoubtedly, the most notable is Alf Gabrielsson, who, with colleagues, has collated over 1300 accounts of strong musical experiences, and has provided an elaborate system to categorize them. Listing just some of the categories and sub-categories gives a flavor of the richness of the material, and the variety of strong experiences that people report: when music takes over; merging with the music; feeling light, floating, leaving one’s body; the content and meaning of life; presence in life, ultimate moments; changed view of oneself and one’s life; music and transcendence; contact with divinity; making contact with one’s innermost self; confirmation through music (Gabrielsson, 2011).

³ See, for example, Grossberg (1992) and Gilbert (2004) who explains how the conception of affect in cultural theory might help illuminate cultural experience, using examples from music. Against those theorists of affect who claim that signification has been overemphasized in much cultural theory, Gilbert argues that we need to understand both meaning and affect. See also Gregg and Seigworth (2010) for a collection of “affect theory.”