

## BOOK REVIEW

---

**Raphaël Nowak and Andy Bennett. *Music Sociology: Value, Technology, and Identity***

New York/London: Routledge, 2022.

ISBN 978-0367210182 (Hbk). 186pp.

**Reviewed by Christine Sharp**

In their book *Music Sociology: Value, Technology, and Identity*, Raphaël Nowak and Andy Bennett present a sociological analysis of music by investigating and uncovering the many manifestations and configurations of music in contemporary society. Nowak and Bennett construct a theoretical approach to understanding music that is informed by a wealth of multidisciplinary perspectives, and demonstrate throughout their book that music is a social and socialising form that cannot be separated from listeners' capacity for engagement with everyday life.

According to the authors, a 'blurriness' (p. 15) exists in the field of music sociology—a field that is broadly conceived as the study of music's social aspects and role in society. Because there are cross- and multi-disciplinary perspectives that define this field, a uniform sociological discourse has not been agreed upon, resulting in a discipline whose paradigms are unclear. Nowak and Bennett wanted to develop a more holistic sociological theorisation of music that would address the gap, and for their volume they synthesise the ideas of prominent music sociologists such as Theodor Adorno, Tia DeNora, John Shepherd, and Kyle Devine among others. Even though music has always been a complex issue, Nowak and Bennett contend that a 'sociological perspective is more needed than ever before' (p. 172), so that the purpose of the presence of music in everyday life can be situated and understood. They emphasise this point by ending each chapter open-endedly, inviting fellow music sociologists to rethink their own contributions to the field.

The chapters in Nowak and Bennett's book are organised by topic, and when taken together they assemble what the authors rightly call a 'jigsaw puzzle' (p. 8) presenting different perspectives on music's value and diffusion in society within a cohesive framework. Exemplary signposting allows readers to easily follow each of the seven chapters, despite the complexity of the topics interrogated. These interconnected topics, Nowak and Bennett note, all relate to the field's 'four main ideas or corollaries' (p. 2): the seriousness of popular music (as an object of investigation); the ubiquity of music; the cultural evolution of music; and the technological innovations of music in relation to its production, consumption and distribution (p. 7).

In the first chapter, Nowak and Bennett conduct what they call 'classificatory work of the discipline' (p. 19). They offer a brief critical overview of the field, so as to 'situate it, discuss its approach to the musical object, and discuss its division into distinct paradigms that attempt to seize the meaning of the diffusion of music within contemporary society' (p. 31). Sociological perspectives on music have existed in academic studies since the 1990s, and have drawn on various empirical methods to achieve new knowledge about the place and function of music in everyday life. Nowak and Bennett argue that all these perspectives have in fact led us to two sociological approaches to music, developed in tandem over time: the 'constructivist' and 'structuralist' approaches. Proponents of constructivism define the meaning of music as being in personal enjoyment, drawing primarily on audience studies to make this point, whereas those who take the structuralist approach defend music's social embeddedness as constitutive of its own meaning. Nowak and Bennett do not favour either one of these approaches throughout their book; rather, they demonstrate the value of each approach to the sociological research of music.

Nowak and Bennett's other main arguments relate to technology and its impact on music's social value. A defining feature of music in the digital age has been the flexibility of its access across technological platforms and devices. Through this increased access, we are able to capture data on listening habits and reveal insights into the values of a society. Nowak and Bennett explore these values by interrogating music's meaning and mediations in everyday sound environments, which they have defined as being a 'complex set of mediations, comprising the spaces and times of everyday life, the body of listeners, the technologies that broadcast music, and the music content that is played' (p. 89). The authors contend that sounds in contemporary everyday life are not a cacophony, nor is there an overload of content for individuals to listen to, or that sounds are indiscernible, or that there is any right way to listen to music (p. 103). These ideas lead Nowak and Bennett to describe the presence of music in these sound environments as 'adequate' (p. 103), and they argue that its presence is co-constructed in relation to genres and its associated listening practices. Nowak and Bennett investigate listening practices through an analysis of music taste, an approach that they argue encourages reductionist perspectives and reveals few insights. Instead, to better understand listening practices, Nowak and Bennett suggest 'a map of what music is appreciated and by whom (through quantitative inquiries),' as well as an analysis of 'how such preferences are enacted within everyday listening practices, with what aim, meaning, and affective outcome (through qualitative inquiries)' (p. 128). Because their suggestion shows a need to understand listening practices through music appreciation, Nowak and Bennett also consider how music is inscribed with meaning and significance. In Chapter 6, they look at music through an identity and ageing lens, whereby images, texts, and objects are associated with everyday music engagement. In doing so, they argue that music

sociologists can 'provide a more comprehensive mapping of how various audiences interact with music,' and 'account for a more comprehensive and attuned perspective on its meaning as it stabilises over time over a range of cultural practices' (p. 149). In their final chapter, Nowak and Bennett demonstrate such mapping by reviewing popular music heritage, which they define as a 'desire to preserve something about music's past' (p. 153). They contend that popular music heritage relates to many cultural interventions on music's value (p. 166), such as album heritage stamps, and that it is at a pivotal stage of existence because the 'diffusion of music and the ways it acquires value are undergoing significant transformations' (p. 166). Nowak and Bennett also extend their framework to reflect on the Covid-19 crisis, demonstrating how music helps us to make sense of our personal narratives during difficult times.

The sociology of music is a complex subject, but Nowak and Bennett have succeeded in contextualising numerous perspectives in the field to help us understand music's place and function in contemporary society. *The Sociology of Music* is an important addition to the field thanks to the authors' ability to coherently synthesise complex arguments about music. Nowak and Bennett's narrative style also offers an engaging read, with each chapter beginning on a focused issue before opening out into complex debates, then concluding with a mostly positive resolution—either a reflection, a call to action, or an instruction.

Although an important contribution to the field, the 'open-endedness' of this book means it may not be well suited to those looking for a 'completed' theorisation of music in society. However, its synthesis of ideas is vitally important when grappling with the history and current debates within music sociology. The holistic framework, clarity, and breadth of discussions in this book make it essential reading for any student or scholar in the field.

#### **About the Author**

Christine Sharp is a recent Master of Music (Research) graduate at the University of Melbourne. Her work approaches the use of music in everyday life from numerous interdisciplinary perspectives, and contributes to understandings of music, society, and wellbeing.