

BOOK REVIEW

Nicholas Cook. *Music, Encounter, Togetherness*

New York: Oxford University Press, 2024

ISBN: 9780197663981 (hbk). 554pp. ill., index

Reviewed by Christine Sharp

When I started to read *Music, Encounter, Togetherness*, I immediately noticed how Nicholas Cook broke the rules! As any music researcher should, he positions himself fully aware of the state of the field, but, as most music researchers should not, he attempts to upend its very foundations. Here Cook presents a remarkable sociological perspective on music: with neoliberal individualism a core idea under scrutiny, and ideological difference its thickest layer, Cook's book aims to demonstrate how music is deeply social and relational. Music is the 'practice of creating relationships in and through sound. It is a relational practice' (p. 4).

Cook incorporates several distinct and unrelated themes and weaves them in and out of the book's nine chapters. This presents challenges for the reader, but Cook warns us that the book is 'a reading recommendation' above all else (p. 6). In the Introduction, he says 'the sequence of chapters is not as rigidly determined as in some of my other books' (p. 5), and so he provided a 'variety of reading strategies' (p. 6). As one example, his seventeen-page Index invites readers to begin wherever they like, and still glean the essence of the book's broader argument. If the reader were interested in the topic of 'listening,' they would be guided to page 52 where they could learn about listening as a form of virtual dancing and virtual participation.

But a reader could also start at any of the chapters, as they read much like individual, in-depth music histories—one of Cook's specialities. Chapter 5, for example, discusses gamelan and Claude Debussy at the 1889 Exposition Universelle. In that chapter, Cook discusses the concept of influence, beginning with a discussion of the writings of Jean-Pierre Chazal, the music enthusiast who introduced Javanese gamelan music to France, and how these induced a rapid response from Ernst Heins, a musicologist who documented Indonesian music. It also caught the attention of other responders, and for Cook this prompted further questions. Was Debussy influenced by the gamelan, or not? There is no real conclusion, and perhaps this is not the best place in this chapter to put it. When Cook had no further perspectives left to

discuss, he moved onto another discussion, this time on Mozart's opera *Idomeneo*, to present an ascription of influence, and how influence can be tested. But there is still no real conclusion. How can it be tested? Cook returns to Debussy and the gamelan until ending, finally, with his own thoughts that 'all influence is the outcome of some kind of encounter, whether face-to-face or through the mediation of sound, musical notation, or word' (p. 219). As a reader, I wonder if his statement draws on the theory of affect: could this statement be another way of explaining affect's relevance to music?

A discussion follows about the influence of colonial exhibits at international exhibitions in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere outside Europe. After giving his readers an overview of the reception and role of these exhibitions, Cook moves on to another discussion on appropriation, through new technologies introduced at the Exposition Universelle. The Edison phonograph was one of these technologies, and Cook argues that appropriation becomes an issue when no recordings were made of the Javanese music—there was only notation, which does not accurately represent Javanese music, due to the tuning systems of Western instruments. Cook argues that the notation made of this music is approached with the mindset of late-twentieth-century American music theorists, which is problematic as Western notation cannot always be a direct translation from another culture. Leaving his readers there, he returns to the idea of influence and ends the chapter open-endedly saying: 'there is still something fragile about a conception of influence that locates it in undiscoverable cognitive processes, deduced through a long and uncertain chain of arguments from surviving documents' (p. 271). Cook does not discuss his argument further, and perhaps does not need to. Rather, as he warns in the Introduction, he recommends further exploration of these issues by the reader themselves. Subsequently, in Chapter 6, Cook examines music and modernisation in China. The only thread connecting the chapters is that they both touch on the transcultural, and music as a social practice. Some direct signposting would have been welcome here, but we have already been warned of his approach!

No doubt Cook's framing makes for particular challenges, but his discussions within the chapters are undeniably interesting. Because he finishes chapters open-endedly, he does not leave those of us who read the book from cover to cover with much preparation and context for the next. Notwithstanding this, Cook is almost forgiven by his Afterword ('On Certainty'), where he finally explains why he wrote the book without those 'expected' arguments and conclusions, saying: 'this book could open things up, prompting a centrifugal rather than centripetal movement of ideas' (p. 487). Cook did not want to write conclusions that summarise main points and bring things to a close; he wrote chapters that catch our attention and prompt core-shaking questions.

Chapter 9 features the terms 'geometrical' and 'vitalist' to conceptualise music sense-making. Cook says that 'the first [is] built on the values of musical textuality, unity, and inherent meaning on which modern (or modernist) musicology was built, and the second on the opposed values of collage, emergence, and ineffability' (p. 487). Cook connects his geometrical approach to musicological aspects that call listeners' 'personal investment in the composer' through discussions on the modern and autonomous self, and the canonic works of composers like Beethoven. For his vitalist approach, Cook connects Beethoven's Congress of Vienna works that he claims 'not only express community but are constitutive of it, and so aligned to the premodern or social self' (p. 487). Cook suggests Beethoven did this to 'focus

on the aspects of music that contribute to its effect yet fall through the theoretical nets of established music studies' (p. 487). Through this, he argues that 'our modern concept of the Viennese classics is in fundamental respects anachronistic' (p. 487), meaning that these classics can help us interpret the destiny of Beethoven's canonic works as understood through the concept of modern selfhood.

In terms of bigger-picture ideas, Chapter 9 also presents the theory that music can always make sense in another way, and that making sense of music is done not only in one way (yes, he really says it that simply, and the argument could not be paraphrased better!). Cook illustrates this through two 'piggy-backed' issues: notation and the 'wipe-out phenomenon,' something he borrows from music psychologist Jeanne Bamberger to describe what happens when looking at the notes and not the actions that sound the notes (p. 488). Notation is reductive in nature and one-dimensional, encouraging a view that notation is all that music is. Referring to Christopher Hasty and Riccardo Wanke (both leading theorists and analysts of sound), Cook instead posits that there are 'concrete particulars' and sound is 'the very stuff of music' that is more closely engaged with notation, while 'the cluster of phenomena that constitutes musical togetherness, such as the interactive processes of entrainment illustrated by groove, with its connotations of affective intimacy and its ability to engender experiences of solidarity, mutual dependence, and trust' is something more important that occurs between the notes to describe dimensions of meaning and affect. Moreover, Cook adds that 'just as in daily life people create and communicate relationships with one another through almost imperceptible nuancing of gesture and deportment, so acts of communicative musicality take place on a micro level that leaves no trace in notation' (p. 489).

These important aspects of music are discussed in musicology as a 'phenomenon of aesthetic subjectivity,' because they are not captured in the 'notational nets through which they defined and pursued their object of study' (p. 489). These discussions were left to the applied fields that also study music, for example, music health and wellbeing, and music therapy. Cook credits the idea of music reduced to a score to the idea of 'top-down management,' of Max Weber's concept of rationalisation from modernisation theory. Weber saw music as an 'unmediated expression of emotion, intuition, and inspiration, and therefore inherently irrational' (p. 489)—an idea that was clothed in philosophical respectability in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Cook rightly claims that the aftermath of the 1939–45 war reshaped this thinking in musicology, as institutions tapped into scientific American academia. He is adamant that he does not want to argue for a 'permanent or metaphysical duality' (p. 489) between rational and irrational—in music or elsewhere—as Weber claims that something is only perceived as irrational from a rational standpoint. For Cook, this means that musical togetherness is not inherently irrational, but 'they seem so when approached from a scriptist perspective (what Cook calls 'scriptist fundamentalism' [p. 90] to refer to the acquiring of understanding music in notional terms alone), and as such are vulnerable to the wipe-out phenomenon' (p. 491).

Also in the Afterword, Cook uses examples from South Korean music to contend that all performance is 'inherently improvisatory and emergent' (p. 492). He claims that even in highly rationalised traditions, the instrumental and vocal education of the West is not as rationalised as it appears to be, and therefore, imitation and embodiment communicates tacit knowledge indispensable for musical performance. Cook argues that Western art music culture illustrates how the irrational has been structured in a framework of rationalised modernity: music

illustrates this pattern and broadly applies the pattern across society. Throughout his life, Cook says he observed how musical culture maintains two things at once: embracing the irrational while unduly constraining it. But as Cook claims, 'music as practised and experienced cannot be fully codified as the output of any system of rules and representations' (p. 493). He argues that 'all musical performance is improvisation, regardless of whether or not there are music stands in front of the musicians' (p. 496). Musicians do not just perform, they 'improvise' and they do this, as Cook says, 'within the spaces that are opened up by notation' (p. 496). If thought of in this way, the 'iron curtain,' as Cook calls it, between notated and non-notated music starts to fade away. As a reader, I wonder if improvisation is an activity better discussed separately from performance, as its commonly understood definition makes it quite distinct from mere performance and is, rather, spontaneous composition. If thought of as an activity that is like performance, and something musically relational, improvisation would be a 'type' of performance, but I would not go as far as to say it 'is' performance.

Ultimately, Cook raises awareness of a relational approach to music that builds on the values of human relationships and musical togetherness to explain meaningful ways of communication across cultural divides. Any aspect of music has its mysteries and difficulties, and Cook has succeeded in discussing numerous topics that catch our attention and cause us to question musical practices. Musical togetherness is something Cook wanted his readers to be more aware about in their own research and, thanks to his ability to defiantly present his topic, *Music, Encounter, Togetherness* is an important addition to the field. Written in an engaging style—despite lacking clear links between chapters—the book is excellent reading on an array of topics that demonstrate music as a relational practice. More broadly, its range of subjects could even serve as an example of 'music research togetherness.' For these reasons, the book is necessary reading for all scholars and students in music.

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.