

---

H-France Review Vol. 11 (January 2010), No. 7

Barbara Lebrun, *Protest Music in France: Production, Identity and Audiences*. Farnham and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 2009. xi + 292 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, discography and index. £50.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN 978-0-7546-6472-7.

Review by Hugh D Dauncey, Newcastle University, England, U.K.

Developments in musicology during the latter part of the twentieth century saw a shift of interest to the cultural context of the production and reception of music(s) and a correlative attention being paid to subject position and identity. Popular musicology and the sociological and sociocultural study of music in general has grown in strength and in ambition, increasingly addressing questions of individual expression in music, the contexts and meanings of musical crossovers and the mixing of genres and concepts such as « authenticity. » Although in France itself, academic researchers may have seemed slow to recognise and investigate their country's rich field of popular musical production and consumption, French popular music(s) and the state cultural policies which often accompany or provide the context for them provide a fascinating source of case-studies. Barbara Lebrun is herself French, but has chosen to work in the United Kingdom, currently researching and teaching at the University of Manchester.

Lebrun's analysis of « protest » music in France since the early 1980s is a very welcome contribution to the ongoing deconstruction both of French « popular music » in general and of the music(s) of contestation in particular. As well as exemplifying recent developments in mainstream musicology, Lebrun's interest in French popular-cultural production represents a relatively new movement towards the legitimisation of the study of the « popular » in departments of « French studies » in the United Kingdom: after canonical literature, then art-house cinema, more mass-audience cultural artefacts are now gaining a place as accepted objects of research and study, which is a trend which can only strengthen any claims of « impact » on wider society that should be made for « modern languages » research. Lebrun's study is thus doubly welcome both for the light it sheds in French music, culture, politics and society, and for the contribution it makes to contemporary French studies.

The study is divided into three sections, which together present a logical and considered treatment of the complex and multifaceted subject which is « protest » music in the French context. The first section considers the French music industry itself, focusing on the relationships between independent labels, the major recording companies and the French state (in the form of its wide-reaching cultural policies addressing popular culture) which together determine the conditions of the production of popular music overall, and of *rock alternatif* (France's principal subversive genre) in particular. The second section provides detailed analysis of cultural productions representative of the expression in music of « protest » and contestation relating to the vexed issue of French national identity; here the study focuses on the genres of *chanson néo-réaliste* and *rock métis*, and on the (highly successful) career of the French musician Manu Chao. The final section looks at audience reception and the construction of possible 'alternative' identities in contemporary France, and analyses the ways in which French music 'festivals' of various kinds can be interpreted as sites of subversive or alternative identities. A brief Introduction and Conclusion to the volume provide an admirably succinct and clear framing of the overriding issues of authenticity, protest, reaction, consumerism, industry, quality and identity, at the same time as locating the case-studies analysed within the wider context of popular music/*chanson* (and its sociocultural and sociological interpretation) in post-war France. The extensive bibliography and intelligently

selective discography represent excellent tools for further study and research into contemporary French popular music of all genres.

Lebrun's summary and analysis of the forces and structures that have coalesced since the early 1980s to create the contemporary French music industry provides an interesting and stimulating discussion of a complex of factors within whose interactions, she rightly argues, French alternative rock music related negatively to the « mainstreamization » of most of popular music. The coverage of the role of the state—in its multiple functions of subsidizer, promoter, guardian of national linguistic and cultural specificities and so—is intelligent and concise, but perhaps somewhat over-brief, albeit in a study whose overall aim is not to provide a critique of French cultural policy in popular music. The principal strength of the chapter on the « French » music « authenticity » became—under the influence of varied resistances to mainstream pop or *variétés*—no longer the sole preserve of *chanson* with high-cultural pretensions as had been the case since the 1950s and 1960s, but also a defining feature of genres which crystallized a developing notion of « resistance » to an increasingly globalized music industry. Foremost among these genres was *rock alternatif*; and Lebrun skilfully illustrates with a series of brief case-studies of some of the more significant bands who espoused the aim of resisting the « mainstreamization » of French popular music (Bérurier Noir, Louise Attaque, Têtes Raïdes, Mano Negra) the extent to which concepts of « authenticity » and « anti-commercialism » characterised both the productions of the « independent » record labels and the major recording companies keen to maintain a dimension of diversity in their supply of music.

The central core of the book is to be found in the three substantial chapters of part II, which each address a major genre of French « protest » music, analysing the ways in which the music produced by bands in the 1990s and 2000s continued to express notions of « authenticity », « resistance » and « protest » in extension of the agenda set out in the 1980s and subsequently by *rock alternatif*. The cultural and political ambitions of these genres—essentially *chanson néo-réaliste* and *rock métis* here for Lebrun—were intimately interlinked with notions of national identity and were played out against the backdrop of ongoing French soul-searching during the later decades of the twentieth century and indeed nowadays, about the meaning of identity—crucially national but also otherwise—in a globalised world, and in a cultural sector dominated by « mainstreamized » pop music and consumerist « modernity. »

*Chanson réaliste* and *rock métis* were developments of *rock alternatif* which asserted ideological concerns through protest music. *Chanson réaliste* is conveniently exemplified by the bands Pigalle, Nègresses Vertes and Têtes Raïdes, known to many music fans inside and outside France, their celebrity demonstrating the rather surprising success of a genre imbued with a serious ideological earnestness, but which in addition emphasises nostalgia and physical and social marginality. As Lebrun points out, however, this connection with the past is a way of expressing left-leaning dissatisfaction with a present of consumerism, individualism and dehumanization, but its « protest nostalgia » based on a musical genre dominant in the inter-war period makes problematic its relationship to the new multiethnic and multicultural France of today. It is the genre of *rock métis* that better exemplifies the tensions experienced by contemporary French musicians about both national identity and the market domination of popmusic. Lebrun's treatment of the ways in which *rock métis* and notions of hybridity, « Arabness » and indeed « world music » interrogate previously accepted concepts of singular and monolithic national identity as well as protesting against the standardization imposed by the music industry is assured and comprehensive, emphasizing the « bitter sweet » dimensions to *métissage* as exemplified by groups such as Zebda. The discussion of the world-famed French-born Manu Chao in chapter four is similarly stimulating, describing how he has achieved popular success with a style of music which blends *métissage*, festivity and cosmopolitanism into a message of opposition to globalization, racism and deterritorialization. With Manu Chao, as Lebrun discusses, « authenticity » of voice and message are thus joined—in a *rock métis* genre—with a larger movement of protest.

The final part of the study is devoted to analysis of the audiences for the different musics of protest that Lebrun identifies. There are two strands to this discussion of how different modes of consumption of « protest » popular music(s) illustrate the tensions and problems for music fans who identify themselves as « alternative » within consumer society: firstly (in chapter five) Lebrun uses ethnographic field-work techniques to elucidate what participants at a variety of French music festivals organised in the late 1990s and 2000 felt about their experiences and situates these findings within the context of recent French theorizations of « taste » and cultural preferences such as those of Pierre Bourdieu and Antoine Hennion; and secondly (in chapter six), a stimulating discussion of music festivals as sites of « alternative » identities reveals how festival attendance can be constructed both as revolt and protest against standardization of culture in the music industry but also, how the French state has been interested in supporting festivals to maintain a diversity of musical production and consumption within the overall « mainstreamization » of popular music. These two chapters are, like the preceding treatments of the main genres of protest and contestation, strong, well-informed and well-written, and Lebrun's ethnographic approach to audiences is, as she rightly points out, a useful innovation in a field where French researchers have generally been loath to tread.

Overall, this is a very welcome contribution indeed to the growing literature—in articles and books—written in English on French popular music(s). The analysis is well-focused, well-grounded in existing debates both on music, musicology and music studies in general and in a comprehensive knowledge of contemporary and recent music in France. Theory and theoretical constructs are employed sensibly and relevantly and always serve to enlighten rather than to obfuscate, and the writing is at all times clear and concise. All in all Barbara Lebrun has produced a study of the politics and culture of « protest » music in France in recent decades which will be of interest to all students and researchers interested in music in general or music in France in particular. I am sure her volume will soon find a place on library shelves in universities worldwide where music studies and French studies alike are broadening their fields of enquiry to include contemporary and more popular concerns.

Hugh D Dauncey  
Newcastle University

[h.d.dauncey@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:h.d.dauncey@ncl.ac.uk)

Copyright © 2010 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172