
H-France Review Vol. 23 (June 2023), No. 105

Sarah Hickmott, *Music, Philosophy and Gender in Nancy, Lacoue-Labarthe, Badiou*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020. x + 245 pp. Notes and bibliography. \$110.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781474458313; \$29.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781474458320; \$110.00 U.S. (ePub). ISBN 9781474458337; \$110.00 U.S. (pdf). ISBN 9781474458344.

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In some ways, it is unfortunate that a book like this continues to be needed. But books like Sarah Hickmott's *Music, Philosophy and Gender in Nancy, Lacoue-Labarthe, Badiou* will continue to be valuable for as long as so many discourses in the humanities continue to uncritically portray music through Romantic categories that presume it to be ahistorical, universal, and "more intimately connected to essences or truths" than other artistic or intellectual practices (p. 2). At its most basic level, this book offers an attentive interdisciplinary survey of how such assumptions--which Hickmott groups together under the heading of "musical exceptionalism" (p. 4)--manifest in and are potentially subverted by the work of three relatively contemporary French philosophers: Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Alain Badiou. Over five chapters, Hickmott situates their conceptions of music in relation to previous positions from Western music history, ranging from ancient Greece to the present, while also foregrounding the important fact that music is rarely just a concept--that it is also generally produced in the world through embodied practices. *Music, Philosophy and Gender* thus lays out several complex perspectives that help to challenge and extend traditional philosophical and academic ideas about what music is and how it might relate to culture and subjectivity.

As its title suggests, one of the predominating lenses through which this book explores music in the work of its three eponymous philosophers is that of gender. Hickmott's position seems to be that ideas about music's immediacy and its presumed associations with truth have historically echoed discourses that associate femininity with ideas of nature, feeling, and excess. One is reminded of the reasoning behind the old slogan sometimes identifying music as the "queen of the arts," to take just one example. Hickmott uses this kind of association as a conceptual starting point to explore how gender still finds itself tangled up with music in the more recent philosophical writing that her book addresses. From this point of view, her arguments might be read productively alongside texts like Philip Brett's "Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet," which considers similar ideas with regard to music and sexuality.[1]

The reader who is interested in a critical outline of the relationship between gender and art in Nancy, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Badiou will certainly find much to think about in this book. But while questions of gender are indeed given pride of place (for instance in its title), *Music, Philosophy and Gender* also discusses several other social approaches to music that go beyond any

straightforwardly gender-based analysis. Particularly noteworthy in this regard would be Hickmott's emphases on music's broader relations to politics, language, and selfhood, as well as her important claim—which informs the general approach of the book's first chapter—that music as a concept is not reducible to any single definition or use, but that it is imbued with an essential “metaphoricity” (p. 49). It is in this sense that, at the very end of the book, Hickmott even makes the radical suggestion that we might just “jettison the category of ‘music’ altogether” (p. 223)—not because music isn't valuable but because, when considered rigorously, the signifier “music” quickly opens onto a set of concepts and practices that extend far beyond any traditional idea of the art as it has been understood in the history of aesthetics.

Along these lines, *Music, Philosophy and Gender* explores not only how music acts as a source of aesthetic pleasure but also how it plays a formative role with regard to the constitution of the subject in the world. Put another way, taking the word in its Latin sense, one could say that Hickmott's text thematizes music's *educative* function (from *e* + *ducere*, leading out) as a counter to the “pre-cultural, ahistorical musicality”—or “musical exceptionalism”—against which her book consistently argues (p. 4). Probably the most obvious and well-known example of such a musical “education” can be found in the ancient Greek idea of *mousikē*, which, as Hickmott observes (cf. pp. 38-49 and passim), is very different from the contemporary idea of *music*, shaped as the latter has been by so many fixed modern forms and disciplinary structures. By contrast, an ancient *mousikē* would have named a much wider range of practices, including the singing of epic poetry by an oral poet, or rhapsode: such practices served several social functions, among which would have been oral poetry's pedagogical role in constituting a kind of sonic archive or “encyclopedia”—as Eric Havelock put it [2]—that enabled the transmission of cultural, ethical, and practical forms of knowledge between generations before the developments of writing and literacy.

Such a relationship between song and knowledge posed a major problem for early philosophy: this, for instance, is partly why Plato's *Ion* is so invested in arguing that the rhapsode Ion does not actually know anything when he recites Homer's poetry—a claim that might otherwise seem odd to a modern reader. For Plato, in the absence of any true knowledge, Ion and other rhapsodes sing songs that are pleasant to the senses but ultimately insubstantial, like bees making honey (a sort of pun in the Greek). [3] In other words, Plato's dialogue criticizes the social role of *mousikē* as a kind of artificial sweetener that covers over a lack of philosophically sound thinking. In this sense, the *Ion* marks one important moment when a properly philosophical *logos* begins to extricate itself from its origins in what would only later come to be known separately as “music” and “poetry.” Against this frequently oversimplified split between art and philosophy, however, the three thinkers whose work Hickmott explores can each be understood to treat music (at least implicitly) in its more complex, pre-Platonic entanglements with sociality and the production of knowledge.

In its discussions of *À l'écoute* [*On Listening*], for instance, Hickmott's book examines how Nancy links the subject's relation to and knowledge of itself with a kind of musicality, in his idea of a sonorous “*renvoi*,” an embodied resonance or returning of the self to itself that constitutes the very condition of its possibility (p. 64). Similarly, in its third chapter, *Music, Philosophy and Gender* goes on to explore a kind of resonance at the heart of selfhood in the work of Lacoue-Labarthe and his idea of the “catacoustic” subject, a rhythmic model of a subject “that is given to ‘itself’ pre-specularly through echo, rather than through reflection” (p. 89). In both of these cases, Hickmott shows—not without problematizing them—how these philosophers use musical (or

perhaps *mousikal*) ideas to challenge traditionally specular philosophical models of subjectivity and its *Bildung*.

The longest chapter of *Music, Philosophy and Gender* then examines Badiou's rather different neo-Platonist philosophy, partly in order to present another way in which music can be understood in a sociocultural or perhaps "educative" manner. Hickmott notes that whereas a project like Nancy's focuses on the constitution of the subject in relation to the sonorous and "sensuous materiality" of music (p. 58), Badiou's project is committed to a more traditional Hanslickian-Schoenbergian model of "structural listening" that considers music to be revelatory of abstract, universal truths (cf. pp. 166-167). However, in Hickmott's view, what distinguishes Badiou's idea of musical truth from the essentialist thinking that she earlier associates with "musical exceptionalism" is the fact that his claims to universality and truth are (paradoxically) also supposed to be concretely situated in relation to historicizable "events" (cf. p. 145). And yet, one of the book's major criticisms of this Badiouian model is that its understanding of the musical forms through which its truths might be produced are ultimately too culturally and historically specific, in that they are shaped almost exclusively by conventional ideas about music that Western musicology "had uncritically assumed to be valid, true and aesthetically superior for most of the discipline's history" (p. 182).

The book ends with an extended meditation on all three philosophers' engagements with the rhapsodizing of Richard Wagner, for whom musical affect often explicitly acts as a kind of Pied Piper glorifying particular ideas or ideologies.[4] The political dangers of this latter approach to musical "education" are of course already infamous; but again, what Hickmott's book reminds us is that music is never completely separable from such educative functions—even if they might sometimes be less obvious or conscious than they are in Wagner. Music, in other words, is not a transcendent universal freed from the fetters of its own cultural, political, and historical conditions. Indeed, to figure it in this way, as an "exceptional" art whose truth content lies beyond the concerns of the world that produces it, only serves to blind analysis to the concrete role that music inevitably plays—alongside and not in excess of other arts and institutions—in the formation of communities and subjects. In some ways, then, approaches to music that would reject its politicization *tout court* risk finding themselves in a position that is potentially even more precarious than Wagner's own, since they do not really escape the problem of a musical politics, but only fail to acknowledge it. It is for this reason that Hickmott's text insists on so critically and persistently engaging with the "assumptions [...] presumed and carried by 'music' as a site for the com-position of minds, bodies and practices" (p. 224).

Music, Philosophy and Gender in Nancy, Lacoue-Labarthe, Badiou thus presents a much broader survey of the sociopolitical ramifications of different philosophies of music than its title would initially suggest. Its arguments do offer an important consideration of gender and how it relates to music and philosophy; and indeed this relation provides the central framework through which the book carries out its analyses. But Hickmott's text does not limit itself to this single perspective and ends up exploring a much wider set of ideas about how music is constructed as a concept in philosophy and theory. In the end, then, this book will be valuable for readers interested in a survey of how the relation between music and gender manifests in the work of three influential French philosophers, but it can also be read more generally as a compelling and occasionally provocative call to interrogate the many ways in which the idea of music has been (and continues to be) deployed across academic disciplines and social discourses.

NOTES

[1] Philip Brett, “Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet,” in Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas, eds., *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology, Second Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2011): 9-26.

[2] Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963). cf. chapter four, pp. 61-86. See also Penelope Murray and Peter Wilson eds., *Music and the Muses: The Culture of ‘Mousikē’ in the Classical Athenian City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[3] Plato, *Ion*, 534a-b. See also Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, Paul A. Kottman, trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 87–88; and Rana Saadi Liebert, “Apian Imagery and the Critique of Poetic Sweetness in Plato’s *Republic*,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 140/1 (2010): 97-115 (esp. pp. 98-99).

[4] See, for example, Richard Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, William Ashton Ellis, trans. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), pp. 208-209.

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ISSN 1553-9172