Article

Cultural Sociology
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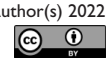

DOI: 10.1177/17499755221137507
journals.sagepub.com/home/cus


Beginning at the Beginning: Towards a Trans-actional Music Sociology

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Abstract

Music sociology has proven a fertile arena for the study and theorization of object–subject interaction, with the work of scholars such as Tia DeNora and Antoine Hennion marking its key contribution to the 'new sociology of art'. Recent years have, however, witnessed no little debate amongst music sociologists about the broader purchase and value of such scholarship, especially considering its apparent challenge to Bourdieu's critical cultural sociology. This article seeks to contribute to debates in this area by advocating a novel approach to questions about music's relation to the social, one that seeks less to map the social distribution of taste profiles or explore how listeners make use of music's affordances than understand the variable ways in which music emerges as something to be attended to (or not) in the first place. Drawing on recent work in relational sociology, the mature philosophy of pragmatist John Dewey as well as new materialist thought, this article explores the potential of a trans-actional prospectus for music sociology. This is an approach that advocates a 'flat' social ontology in order to focus on questions about the constitution and configuration of musical events. In so doing, the article argues that if we are to gain a better understanding of music's varied relation to the social, it is necessary to transcend the residual substantialism implicit in 'new sociology' and mediation-focused accounts and adopt an approach capable of integrating concerns of object-ness, emergence and attention with questions of power and inequality.

Keywords

Bourdieu, listening, music, relational, trans-action

Introduction

In an article exploring the findings of an ethnographic study conducted at an open-air land art/architectural festival,[1] Varvara Kobyshcha (2018: 478) adopts a novel approach

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to questions about the relationship between cultural objects and audiences by posing the question: 'how does an aesthetic object happen?'. In detailing how the 'emergence' of land art pieces depended, for the festival audiences she studied, upon their perception and interaction with a host of contextual, situational, spatial and temporal factors, Kobyshcha illuminates the merit of questioning the oft-assumed object-*ness* of art. Once we do this, she suggests, the way is open for a deeper exploration of how audience perception 'plays a constitutive role in the object's physical state and its very existence as an *object*' (Kybyshcha 2018: 478).

Interestingly, Kobyshcha draws upon scholarship from music sociology to situate her theoretical approach, noting how music's immateriality has encouraged the production of scholarship attentive to the interaction between audiences and aesthetic objects in the generation of the latter's force or effects. In particular, she takes up ideas from Tia DeNora's (2000) ethnomethodologically-inspired research on music in everyday life and Antoine Hennion's (2005, 2008, 2012) STS-informed work on music taste and the activity of tasting. Yet while music sociology has indeed proved a fertile arena for the study and theorization of text–listener or object–subject interaction – something marking its contribution to approaches falling under the rubric of 'the new sociology of art' (de la Fuente, 2007) – recent years have witnessed no little debate amongst music sociologists about the broader purchase and value of such work, especially in the light of its apparent challenge to Bourdieu's critical cultural sociology (Born, 2005; de Boise, 2016; Hanquinet, 2018; Prior, 2011; Schwarz, 2013; Varriale, 2016). A key issue, for numerous commentators, relates to the challenge of connecting the primarily 'microsocial' focus (Born, 2005: 22) of scholars such as Hennion and DeNora with broader, macrosocial concerns. Indeed, although the new sociology of art might valuably attend to aesthetic materials and the nature of aesthetic experience, it only does this – so the argument goes – by collapsing the social contextual co-ordinates of Bourdieu's powerful analysis to an excessive degree.

This article contributes to the debates in this area by advocating an approach that seeks less to map the social distribution of taste profiles, repertoires or tasting techniques than gain an understanding of the variable ways in which – and the degrees to which – music emerges as something to be attended to (or not) in the first place. While wary of either reifying tastes, dispositions and techniques or proposing correlations between the qualities or properties of music and the attributes of persons, the approach sketched in what follows marks no retreat from a rigorous engagement with questions about music's place in social life. Far from it. In fact, it remains keenly attuned to the ways in which music might be said to function at the social plane, even if, at the same time, it refuses to treat either music or society as substantiated 'things' that somehow exist before, outside of or apart from processual social relations.

The approach discussed in the article draws on recent theorizing in relational sociology (Dépelteau, 2008, 2015, 2018a, 2018b; Dépelteau and Powell, 2013; Morgner, 2020; Powell and Dépelteau, 2013) to consider the potential of a theoretical prospectus which sees no necessary antinomy between 'micro' and 'macro' accounts of music's place in social life, but instead adopts a 'flat' social ontology and a process-relational, transactional[2] approach to what has heretofore largely been theorized as the 'interaction' of music and listeners. In what may strike some readers as a somewhat paradoxical move,

rather than seeing the work of so-called 'micro'-sociologists of music as excessively focused on instances of aesthetic experience, I suggest that if we are to gain a better understanding of music's variable functioning within social life, these accounts do not, in fact, go far enough in either empirical or theoretic terms. That is, while 'micro' accounts may have valuably unveiled the multiplicity of elements at play within music–listener interactions, in beginning their analysis only *after* some music has become meaningful to some agent/'amateur', their critical sociological purchase is prematurely prescribed. What I believe would therefore benefit music sociology is a deeper engagement – reflective of the line of inquiry pursued by Kobyshcha – with the matter of music's emergence as some*thing* to be attended to (as such) in the first place.

The article adopts the following structure. First, I review recent debates addressing music listening, consumption and taste in music sociology, considering the distinctive contribution of music sociologists to work in the new sociology of art. Next, I assess various criticisms of this work and consider some of the solutions proposed by those reluctant to abandon the critical impulses of Bourdieu's cultural sociology. This is followed by an engagement with Georgina Born's proposed recommendations for overcoming the micro–macro impasse and her conceptualizations of 'musical assemblage' and (social) 'mediation'. The second part of the article outlines the core tenets of the transactional prospectus via a discussion of its philosophical underpinnings in the work of John Dewey and Arthur Bentley (2008 [1949]) and its place within recent relational sociological theorizing. The third section of the article turns the discussion back to debates about taste and listening in music sociology in order to consider the potential contribution of the proposed approach.

Bourdieu, the New Sociology of Art and Music Sociology

It is not without good reason that Bourdieu's analysis of the social functioning of taste continues to occupy a key place in contemporary debates in music sociology. With its rich conceptual scheme and compelling interpretation of cultural knowledge and preference data, *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984 [1979]) stands as a landmark study which rightly exerts a continued influence on questions about cultural consumption and its social significance. As has by now been well rehearsed however, since around the turn of the millennium, Bourdieu's critical sociology of culture began to face critique from 'new sociology of art' scholarship. Several key elements set this at odds with Bourdieu's work. First, where Bourdieu largely approached aesthetic experience in terms of the effects of social relations upon people's dispositions (leading, for example, to the 'pure'/disinterested stance of higher status actors), the 'new' approach has been much more concerned with the processes bound up with tasting, seeing these less as the instantiation of pre-existing dispositions, than being inherently indeterminate and performative in nature. In line with a heightened attention upon aesthetic judgements and the actions implicated in them, the new sociology of art has also sought to bring the materiality of both artworks and beholders into sharper focus, with the former now increasingly seen, through the influence of actor-network theory, as *actants* capable of bringing distinctive potentialities into art object–subject interactions.

In terms of music sociology, the authors whose work most closely reflects the concerns of the new sociology of art approach are undoubtedly Tia DeNora and Antoine Hennion. In an influential contribution to the field, *Music in Everyday Life*, DeNora (2000: 83) takes up 'a perspective devoted to human–music interaction, to the reflexive appropriation of musical materials for the constitution and regulation of agency'. Using ethnographic methods to study real-time interactions and instances of music 'in action' within everyday settings (including aerobics classes, karaoke evenings, music therapy sessions and the retail sector), she illustrates how, by dint of their primary and secondary significations (functioning at the structural-material and connotative levels, respectively), listeners draw upon musical materials 'as devices for the organization of experience, as referents for action, feeling and knowledge formulation' DeNora (2000: 24). A key impulse within DeNora's work issues from her concern that within previous sociological work 'the medium of music was implicitly downgraded; its status shifted, from active ingredient or animating force to inanimate product (an object to be explained)' (DeNora, 2003: 3). In drawing upon a developed interpretation of J.J. Gibson's concept of 'affordance' to help conceptualize music's active dimensions and the ways listeners 'configure objects in and through the ways they – as agents – behave towards those objects' DeNora (2000: 40), DeNora's work has been interpreted as an implicit criticism of the Bourdieusian framework.

More explicit in challenging Bourdieu's treatment of aesthetic experience, however, is the scholarship of Antoine Hennion. Like DeNora, Hennion questions the sanctity of the subject–object dualism that commonly underpins discussions of how music might be said to 'work'. Yet where DeNora is principally concerned with the ways people make use of musical materials within everyday life, Hennion (2008: 36) focuses much more keenly on taste (or 'tasting' to be precise) to 'examine musical works in terms of what they do and make us do'. In an effort to avoid the extremes of academic musicology on one hand and Bourdieusian sociology on the other – something Hennion (2008: 36) terms a 'sterile oscillation between the meaning contained in the works and the meaning projected arbitrarily onto them' – he posits a constitutive relationship between society and music, never losing sight of the active aesthetic experience of the listener or the musical object implicated in it, indeed seeing these, together with the frame(s) of appreciation drawn upon, as co-formed within listening acts. For Hennion then, taste needs be understood as a performance; an ongoing co-production, attendant, in delivering its effects, upon an intermingling of the '*passion*' brought by the '*amateur*' and the qualities or properties of the music. In essence, Hennion seeks to highlight the great deal of dynamic, complex interaction going on when people engage with music. Unfortunately for Bourdieu, as Hennion suggests, the 'totally passive view of the amateur' embedded in the former's 'unilateral thesis on cultural domination' (Hennion, 2005: 132) prevents any meaningful exploration of it.

In his assessment of the state of play in music sociology issuing in the wake of the new sociology of art critique of Bourdieu, Nick Prior (2011) makes an important intervention. While acknowledging the value of 'post-Bourdieusian' approaches – for not only taking aesthetic processes and objects seriously but also dealing sensitively with the complex mediating qualities of music – he nonetheless signals reservations about moving too far away from the Bourdieusian framework, since this ultimately risks leaving 'a

hole where a treatment of power-mediated artistic relations might be found' Prior (2011: 135). In particular, Prior is concerned about the dangers of, on the one hand, a drift (back) towards a reliance on romantic terminologies and, on the other, the uncritical adoption of models which, in granting primacy to the agency of actors, appear to collapse social context to an excessive degree.

Judging by the overall tenor of subsequent debates, Prior's recommendation that rather than jettisoning Bourdieu, music sociologists consider 'deploying him strategically' Prior (2011: 135), has not fallen on deaf ears. Schwarz (2013), for instance, echoes Prior in seeking to retain an attentiveness to the ways expressions of musical taste function as markers of status. At the same time, in acknowledging how one important lacuna in Bourdieu's account concerns his treatment of aesthetic experience, Schwarz (2013: 415) advances a 'sociology of tasting techniques' which seeks to retain in clear view both the social dimensions of cultural consumption as well as their less predictable, singular and decidedly aesthetic aspects.

Other, similarly progressive and synthetic proposals have emerged over recent times. Simone Varriale (2016): 160, for example, drawing on a consideration of the ways Italian music critics interacted with the cultural materials to which they were exposed, proposes an approach to cultural evaluation which sees it 'as a social encounter between the dispositions of social actors (i.e. their habitus) and the aural, visual and narrative properties of cultural objects'. His focus upon the 'encounter' between the histories of social actors and the fields relevant to their activities forms part of an effort explicitly aimed at 'bridging Bourdieu's focus on social trajectories with the attention of post-Bourdieusian scholarship on culture's materiality' (Varriale, 2016: 173). Simon Stewart's (2013, 2015) considered contributions to recent debates in music sociology might also be noted for the ways they encourage a fine-grained focus upon moments and modes of aesthetic engagement, matters of attention and intensity, location, context and interpersonal interaction. While Stewart sees considerable value in the micro-level analyses of Hennion and others, in an effort to go beyond their predominant concern with synchronic instances of aesthetic valuing he too encourages us to 'strategically deploy Bourdieu' (2015: 150) and particularly the concept of habitus, to facilitate a better understanding of how social origins, class and educational backgrounds feed into the durable dispositions informing people's aesthetic evaluations.

Despite acknowledging the contributions of the new sociologists of art, others have been less convinced of the value of engaging with the interactive specificities of people's musical activities, preferring instead to refine or excavate the previously under-elaborated aesthetic dimensions of Bourdieu's framework. One of the ways such efforts have manifested is through a deeper exploration of the 'aesthetic values' (Hanquinet, 2018) or 'aesthetic dispositions' (Daenekindt, 2017) seen to serve as guides in the formation and expression of cultural tastes. Although they refine Bourdieu's rather linear equation of individual dispositions with the aesthetic principles embedded in cultural fields – mainly by foregrounding the indeterminacy of such dispositions' activation across different situations – these approaches nonetheless retain a keen sense of how such principles might 'acquire a force of their own and motivate people's cultural preferences' (Hanquinet, 2018: 1), or lead to the generation of coherent 'dispositional configurations' (Daenekindt, 2017: 50). While alert to some contextual variation, people's aesthetic classifications are

nonetheless hereby seen to largely correspond with the social divisions delimiting the repertoire of values upon which they might draw. Central aspects of the Bourdieusian account therefore remain intact within such proposals.

Beyond Bourdieu: Musical Assemblages and Social Mediation

For others, however, any attempted return to a Bourdieu-inspired approach to music's functioning at the social plane is inevitably doomed to failure. Georgina Born is one noteworthy proponent of this position given how – despite agreeing with Prior and others in seeing the 'micro-social' orientation of DeNora and Hennion as limiting – she diagnoses unsurmountable problems in the way that 'Bourdieu insistently refuses to address the art object and its aesthetic properties, and to allow them to play a part in the unfolding analysis' (Born, 2010: 178). Far more promising, on her account, are 'those mediation theories that have been emerging in recent years in relation to music' (Born and Barry, 2018: 444). On the matter of mediation and its potential, Born's progressive theorizing resonates with that of Hennion in several regards, perhaps most centrally in seeing mediation theories as offering a way out of the same 'two polar reductionisms' (Born and Barry, 2018: 448) characterized by Hennion in terms of a 'sterile oscillation' Hennion (2008: 36). Perhaps unsurprisingly then, Born prescribes similar solutions to Hennion for resisting any recourse to notions of the 'autonomous work' or reliance on 'ideas of reflection, homology or determination' (Born and Barry, 2018: 448) to explain music's social functioning.

However, as much as Born might endorse Hennion's calls for attention to music's constitutive mediations, she remains dissatisfied with the way he 'dwells on the intimate mediation between music lover and musical sound' (Born, 2011: 265). This particular point appears directly relevant to Hennion's pragmatist-inspired impulse to 'recognize the moment of the work in its specific and irreversible dimension . . . allowing oneself to take into account the (highly diversified) ways in which actors describe and experience aesthetic pleasure' (Hennion, 2012: 251). Whereas Hennion sees music's social functioning as importantly bound up with the emergence of specific mediations within moments of music-listener/'amateur' interaction – a process for which he reserves the term 'attachment' – Born argues for the adoption of a more synoptic perspective able to 'trace the historical trajectories of musical assemblages, reconnecting them to analyses of the macro-dynamics of cultural history and technological change' (2005: 34).

Where Hennion's programme therefore foregrounds the contingent ways in which listeners draw music's various mediations into their aesthetic experiences (seeing this as a fruitful way of exploring the 'relative autonomy'[3] which he nonetheless attributes to music), for Born, the final word on that constellation of mediations which comprises the musical assemblage falls to the analyst and ultimately appears to find its basis in their assessment of the aggregated values and practices of musical cultures. That is, while it is noted that 'particular mediations and their interrelations . . . have to be traced empirically through the analysis of specific musical events and cultures' (Born and Barry, 2018: 449), such analysis does not appear to centrally require – as it does for Hennion – recourse

to the accounts of listeners or publics. Rather, Born encourages attention to the ways 'patterns of meaning projected into music are routinely stabilized', how 'stabilities of meaning . . . come to structure musical experience' and depend, for their force, less upon the 'many small acts and individual experiences' which might comprise them, than 'institutional and economic foundations, authority and legitimacy, and charismatic figures' (2005: 14–15). By this account, musical assemblages – being composed of 'a particular combination of mediations . . . characteristic of a certain musical culture and historical period' (Born, 2005: 8) – need to be understood as bearing particular traits irrespective of the ways individuals happen to interact with them.

In adopting this position, Born might be said to align herself with others who have diagnosed an excessive emphasis on the agency of actors in new sociology of art approaches. DeNora's work has perhaps come in for most censure in this regard. Indeed, her concern, in *Music in Everyday Life*, to trace the ways music might be 'used by respondents to ease them on to courses of action and modes of aesthetic agency that they wish to achieve' (DeNora, 2000: 55), has led it to be characterized as an 'individualist functionality of music' (Brandellero et al., 2018: 218) as well as prompting the complaint that so overwhelmingly positive is her account of listener agency that it lacks any sense of '*constrained agency*, of the ways in which social and psychological dynamics might limit people's freedom to act' (Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 40). In a similar vein, Born detects weaknesses in new sociology of art approaches that, by importing 'Latour's emphasis on actors, action, acts and agency', retain 'a troubling echo of the sovereign individual subject of liberal humanism' (Born, 2018: 276). Yet as true as it may be that Hennion and DeNora – in their efforts to grapple with the co-productive activity of listeners and music – grant a good deal of agency to actors/*amateurs* (often attending, it should be acknowledged, to experiences which appear to be sought out by these people), it might still be wondered whether this necessarily means that music sociologists should downgrade a concern with what takes place at the 'micro-social' level when confronting questions about music's social functioning.

A further component of Born's framework also warrants attention, especially considering its proposed importance for circumventing the risk, imported by micro-social approaches, of 'neglecting other dimensions of the social in music' (Born, 2011: 265). This takes the form of analytical attention to music's social mediation, a matter bound up with four distinct orders: (1) the socialities of performance and practice, (2) musically-imagined communities, (3) broader social relations (class, race, gender, etc.) and (4) the social and institutional orders providing the basis for music's production and reproduction (Born, 2013: 140). To attend to these, argues Born, 'is to question any notion that the analysis of social relations at biographical scale can be divorced from wider socio-historical conditions' (2013: 141). In a manner reflective of her approach to the constitution of musical assemblages, questions of whether (or not) these social mediations necessarily impinge upon different people's situated encounters with music are not meaningfully entertained: 'The point is that all four orders of social mediation enter into the musical assemblage' (2013). Born's proposed transcendence of 'micro-social' approaches consequently appears to rest, if not upon any strict essentialization of music and its properties, at least upon *some* substantialization or reification of music's mediations.

What might therefore be suggested is that, as with the 'repertoire' proposals issued by recently reinvigorated Bourdieu-inspired approaches, by seeing music's mediations and assemblages as fundamentally *of*, or subsisting *in* some combination of socio-historical conjunctures and musical cultures, Born's proposals locate a good deal of music's social force and import within 'stabilities of meaning' and away from the potentially unruly and hard-to-predict outcomes of people's always (temporally, spatially, socially, etc.) situated interactions with music. While this approach might, on the one hand, more readily facilitate an engagement with questions of domination, exclusion, resistance and transformation – the stuff of politics – than have extant 'micro-social' approaches, it must nonetheless be seen to partly short-circuit that path along which music's relation to the social must pass: the interface between particular musical sounds and contextually situated listeners. It is to a concern with this interface and its theorization that the discussion now turns.

Trans-actional Sociology

While an acknowledgement of the central significance of relations has long sat at the heart of the sociological project,[4] since the turn of the millennium, a more concerted and self-conscious form of relational sociology has emerged. This has seen numerous social theorists and sociologists, variously drawing upon thinkers including John Dewey, Norbert Elias, Ernst Cassirer, Charles Tilly and Bruno Latour, presenting their work in explicitly relational terms. Yet as has been acknowledged (Kivinen and Piiroinen, 2018; Manterys, 2017; Powell and Dépelteau, 2013), the relationist movement is internally diverse. This much is evident in the important differences between, for instance, the trans-actional approach and other types of relational sociology relevant to cultural sociology, perhaps the most prominent of which employs social network analysis, taking as a core concern 'the link between networks and culture' (Mische, 2011: 85), and conceptualizing the relationality of culture 'in terms of interactions, ties, and networks' (Crossley, 2015: 83). Although such work shares some important similarities with the trans-actional approach, it nonetheless sets itself apart in key regards too. Perhaps most crucial in distinguishing between the various relational approaches are differences at the level of ontology. Indeed, fundamental divergences between forms of relational sociology – such as distinguish the trans-actional approach from the critical realist-inspired relationism of Donati (2011), Archer (2010) or Elder-Vass (2010) – essentially boil down to questions of 'whether they advance some kind of relational ontology, with respect to exactly what kind of ontology that would be, and with respect to how much weight they place upon it' (Kivinen and Piiroinen, 2018: 1).

One centrally important ontological aspect of the trans-actional variant of relational sociology can be traced back to the dilemma identified by Mustafa Emirbayer (1997) in his *Manifesto for Relational Sociology*. In this piece, Emirbayer argues that the key distinction in modern sociology is not one between individual and society, qualitative and quantitative, or agency and structure but rather that between substantialism and relationalism. Substantialism, as Emirbayer (1997: 282-283) notes 'takes as its point of departure the notion that it is substances of various kinds (things, beings, essences) that constitute the fundamental units of all inquiry'. Substantialist analysis begins with

pre-formed, self-subsistent entities interacting with other phenomena. In relationalism, by contrast, conceptions of such static 'things' are replaced with ones of dynamic relation such that 'the very terms or units involved in a transaction derive their meaning, significance, and identity from the (changing) functional roles they play within that transaction' (Emirbayer, 1997: 287). The primary unit of analysis thereby undergoes a crucial shift in the move from substantialism to relationalism: from 'substance', 'essence' or 'entity' to dynamic, unfolding, processual relation. This foundational idea, shared by the process-oriented metaphysics of A.N. Whitehead and the trans-actional approach of Dewey and Bentley alike, grants ontological priority to events over objects, seeing the former as basic or fundamental and the latter as characters or outcomes of them.

Further informing the adoption of such ontological commitments within much recent process-relational work are distinctions concerning the perception of relations (between observed entities or forces), presented by Dewey and Bentley (2008 [1949]) in terms of 'self-action', 'inter-action' and 'trans-action'. Under 'self-action', things are viewed as acting under their own powers with the result that behaviour of various kinds comes to be explained in terms of the effects of some self-actional force or essence. Such premises can be found lying behind explanations in which entity *A* (person/variable) is presented as both external to and exercising power upon entity *B*, irrespective of reactions or resistance by the latter and without any reciprocal effects. Dewey and Bentley see such a portrayal of relations as hopelessly naïve and flawed.

'Inter-action', meanwhile, refers to instances in which 'thing is balanced against thing in causal interconnection' (Dewey and Bentley, 2008 [1949]: 101). As with 'self-action', the entities involved here are assumed 'to be present as substantially separate existences or forms of existence' (Dewey and Bentley, 2008 [1949] 114) prior to their interaction. Dewey and Bentley's reference point in physics is the Newtonian worldview, with its billiard-table universe of unalterable, interacting particles. In sociology, interactional assumptions often underpin variable-based approaches in which the attributes or properties of entities – rather than the entities themselves – are presented as the inter-actants (Selg, 2016). Process-relational thinkers like Dépelteau (2008) refer to explanations based on interactional premises as 'co-deterministic', insofar as they propose that social structures (or some 'crystallized' aspect of them), *partly* determine actors while, at the same time, actors dispose of some 'agency' which sets limits on the causal force of 'structures'.[5] A fundamental problem for such accounts, for Dépelteau (2018b: 502), is that it is 'as if these "forces" would be what they are and do what they do outside their relations in one specific social field'. Indeed, as Emirbayer (1997: 289) notes, substantialist and variable-based approaches 'ignore the ontological embeddedness or locatedness of entities within actual situational contexts'. To overcome the reductionism implicit in co-deterministic thinking, a turn towards trans-action is needed.

To be sure, the shift from 'inter-action' to 'trans-action' represents a significant step in theoretical terms. In fact, Dewey suspected that the challenge trans-actionalism raised to prevailing ways of looking at the world so great as likely to prevent it from being seen as the 'extreme heresy' he considered it to be (Ratner and Altman, 1964: 637, cited in Ryan, 1997). Central to the trans-actional approach outlined by Dewey and Bentley (2008[1949]: 67) in *Knowing and the Known*, is 'the right to see together, extensionally and durationally, much that is talked about conventionally as if it were composed of

irreconcilable separates'. In affirming the radical interdependence of *knowings* and *knowns*, '*what* is experienced' becomes 'coextensive with *how* it is experienced' (Ryan, 1997: 1008) and we come to appreciate that there are no 'realities' or 'entities' intruding from beyond or behind knowing-known events. Rather, what emerges as 'real' is never independent of how it is real-*ized* (as an outcome of activity). Relatedly, 'subjects'/'actors' or 'objects' only come to assume identities and bear attributes as a result of the dynamic, mutually constitutive relationships into which they enter. When, for example, two individuals engage in some mutual activity, we cannot assume that their personal characteristics (such as values, identities, knowledge and so on) *produced* some actions on their part, even if those personal characteristics might have fed into the trans-action in significant ways. As Dépelteau (2015: 56) has noted, the 'point here is quite simple: individual characteristics are key dimensions of actions and reactions, but actions and reactions are also interdependent ones'. Trans-actionalism therefore makes no attempt to deny that individuals have existence or characteristics of their own. In sociological terms however, they only do what they do and become what they do by virtue of their interactive involvement in specific trans-actions (that they co-produce). This facet of the trans-actional approach, has led those such as Selg (2020: 32)to draw attention to its fundamental interest 'in relations that are not something added to social units or something "between" or "among" them, but relations that are *constitutive* of those very units'.

Aside from challenging prevailing understandings of the relations between 'subjects' and 'objects', trans-actionalism's dual emphasis on processual interdependence and mutual constitution also brings important implications for what might otherwise be thought of in terms of 'settings', 'contexts' or 'environments'. As Dewey and Bentley (2008[1949]: 244) note on this matter:

> 'Environment' is not something around and about human activities in an external sense; it is their *medium* or *milieu*, in the sense in which a *medium* is *inter*mediate in the execution or carrying *out* of human activities, as well as being the channel *through* which they move and the vehicle *by* which they go on.

In other words, the trans-actional impulse to 'see together' involves transcending the viewpoint characterized by Cutchin (2004: 303) in term of 'environment as container', instead encouraging us to see any 'separation between person and context, as a separation that . . . we should conceptually transcend' (Cutchin 2004: 308). Echoing such organism-environment continuity, trans-actionalism also resists the temptation to treat 'events as split into fragments answering to such tests as clocks and rules may give' since this delivers only 'a surface account . . . inadequate for the full transaction' (Dewey and Bentley, 2008[1949]: 139). It is therefore also important, according to Dewey and Bentley (2008[1949]: 125), to understand past, present and future as processually interlinked within any trans-action and to acknowledge 'the spatio-temporal connection of all the components'.

Implications for a Trans-actional Music Sociology

What then, are the main implications of the trans-actional perspective for theorizing music's relation to the social? In what follows these are considered first in the light of

trans-actionalism's reconceptualization of musical object–subject relations, secondly, its approach to musical activity as mediated *through* environments and, following this, in how it might deepen our appreciation of the 'micro' without neglecting questions of power and inequality.

A first and fundamental implication of the adoption of a trans-actional perspective emerges from its transcendence of the substantialism characteristic of approaches focused on music–listener (subject–object) interaction. To illustrate, let us contrast the approach advocated herein with DeNora's theorization of musical subject–object relations, central to which is the notion of 'affordance' as something resulting from 'the reflexive process whereby users configure themselves as agents in and through the ways they relate to objects and configure objects in and through the ways they – as agents – behave towards those objects' (DeNora` 2000: 40). Although this formulation appears to echo aspects of a trans-actional prospectus in positioning organisms and 'things' within mutually constitutive relations, it's partial *a priori* substantiation of both reveals the inter-actional premises at work. These bring important reverberations into DeNora's analysis, such that the picture of affordances that emerges sees these take on, by turns, either a notably *agent-centric* character (as when music is used as 'a vehicle . . . out of dispreferred states', (DeNora, 2000: 53)), or else a decidedly *music-centric* one (as when music's 'structuring properties' (DeNora 2000: 108) come to the fore).[6] From the trans-actional perspective, assuming that both some agent(s) and some music are indeed 'present as substantially separate existences or forms of existence, prior to their entry into joint investigation' (Dewey and Bentley, 2008[1949]: 114) is problematic in at least two ways. Firstly, beginning analysis with a 'substantially separate' listener and foregrounding (however selectively) their 'agency' encourages an unhelpful, egocentric perspective upon social processes and, correspondingly, a relative blindness to situational complexity. Secondly, when analysts assume the presence or existence of 'some music' in any given context, they typically set aside any concern with that music's 'object-*ness*' from the perspective of those trans-acting with it.

Interestingly, DeNora's analysis does occasionally show an alertness to how, as Kobyshcha (2018: 482) has it, 'under certain circumstances an object may not happen'. When discussing music's use in retail settings for instance, one staff member is fleetingly cited as noting 'I hardly ever listen to it. Somehow I switch off' (DeNora, 2000: 137). In line with her inter-actional premises however, DeNora 2000: 141 interprets people's inattention to, or ignorance of music principally as functions of their agency, such that 'Music is "there" if and when it is needed . . . if it is not needed it can and is often ignored'. As previously noted, commentators have criticized DeNora's freighting of agency with so heavy an explanatory burden. It is only once we fully depart from substantialist assumptions however, to follow Dewey in acknowledging that there is but one way in which – to temporarily lapse into substantialist language for the purposes of illustration – some musical 'object' might emerge for some percipient, within a given environment and at a particular moment in time, that we clear the way for research sensitive to the processes implicated in that music's variable, situated real-*ization*.

Of course, approaching music primarily as an event whose real-*ization* is bound up with relational processes, is not wholly novel to trans-actionalism. Christopher Small's notion of 'musicking', for example, also argues the need to see music less as an 'object'

than in terms of performance and action. A key problem of assuming 'the "thingness" of music' (Small, 1998: 136), for Small, is that 'the meaning of its being played at the time and place of performance is not questioned' Small, 1998: 136. Yet while his approach resonates with several aspects of trans-actionalism,[7] the direction ultimately taken by Small's analysis differs from that proposed here in two ways. First, as is apparent from Small's discussion of aspects of a symphony music concert (hall, arrangement of audience, buying/selling of tickets, etc.), he attributes essential, substantial features to musicking events.[8] This approach recalls Born's proposals concerning the mediations constitutive of musical assemblages, insofar as it too foregrounds the analyst's understanding of 'what's really going on here' (Small, 1998: 17). Second, in arguing that musicking activities 'model, or stand as metaphor for, ideal relationships as the participants in the performance imagine them to be' (1998: 13) Small's focus – like that of DeNora and Hennion – largely centres upon what might be thought of as *desired/sought-after* and *heightened* experiences with music. Consequently left out of this picture are not only more mundane encounters with music, but also those more ambivalent, contentious or problematic encounters in which musical sounds might be begrudgingly yet enduringly 'heard'. Given that the latter are likely more prevalent than their inverse for many living in developed societies (Garcia Quiñones et al., 2013; Nowak and Bennett, 2014; Stockfelt, 1997), to treat them as peripheral to questions about music's social functioning appears troublesome.

The trans-actional approach offers two main ways of building upon Small's propositions. First, by incorporating the insight that 'there are as many "reals" as the unlimited number of . . . inquiries . . . through which these may be "realized"' (Ryan, 2011: 27), we might dethrone the analyst's privileged viewpoint and bring the processes implicated in trans-actors' own variable real-*ization* of musicking events to the fore. Secondly, the same insight enables us to better grapple with the complexity and ambivalence of musicking events by refusing to see them exclusively in terms of opportunities to 'affirm and celebrate our relationships' (Small, 1998: 142), but as also potentially bound up with efforts to, for instance, stake out social territory (Witchel, 2010), control public space (Hirsch, 2007), repress or displace identities (Cloonan and Johnson, 2002), cause discomfort (e.g. Eckhard, 2001; Goodman, 2012), or exercise power in more diffuse ways (Attali, 1985). Essentially, then, the anti-substantialist impulses of trans-actionalism translates, in grounded terms, into both an avoidance of totalizing perspectives upon musical events and a concerted effort, via detailed, responsive and sensitive empirical inquiry, to grapple with the divergent ways in which trans-actors (dis-)value musicking events.

A further key way in which trans-actionalism stands to contribute to music sociology relates to how understanding musical activities as necessarily mediated *through* environments gives rise to new questions and analytical opportunities. A first point to note here concerns how attending closely to music's mediating environments means engaging, more so than interactional accounts, with localized and temporal conditions and their variable implications for (different) trans-actors and their musicking activity. Concern is therefore devoted to trans-actors' perception and understandings of already-ongoing situated action, the roles of co-present others, the material arrangement and symbolic dimensions of place(s)/space(s) and how these might variously inhibit or encourage

different (people's) musical trans-actions. Of course, viewing environments less in terms of passive 'backdrop' or 'container' than as active mediators of musical trans-actions also encourages attention to how they might be overlain with power dynamics of various kinds. Such concerns are, of course, no less pertinent to Small's symphony hall than, for example, the bus or train carriage of a teenage 'sodcaster',[9] the 'parking lots, walkways, doorways and parks' (Sterne, 2013: 121) where programmed sounds circulate, or, perhaps, the often contested listening spaces of domestic life.

Undoubtedly, important and insightful work has already contributed to our understanding in this area. Especially noteworthy is Anahid Kassabian's (2013: 4) work on ubiquitous listening and ubiquitous music – 'the kind of music that we listen to as part of our environment' – for illustrating the value of taking questions about listening into 'workplaces, shops, homes, cars, buses, trains, phones, restaurants, clubs' where it commonly functions 'without our sanction or control' (Kassabian 2013: xii). For Kassabian, the fact that music scholarship has had 'far too little to say about most of the relationships between most musical events and most people in the industrialized world' (Kassabian 2013: 19) means 'studies of music reception need to reconsider their baseline assumptions' (Kassabian 2013: 110) and develop an appreciation of how 'many kinds of listening take place over a wide range of degrees or kinds of consciousness and attention' (Kassabian 2013: xxi–xxii).

Yet as much as Kassabian's work reflects some similar concerns as the trans-actional approach, her central concept of ubiquitous listening – 'listening as a simultaneous or secondary activity' (Kassabian 2013: 18) – emerges from her analysis as a problematically monolithic category. That is, despite proposing a notion of attention spanning the 'fully attentive and fully inattentive' (2013: xxi), Kassabian's analysis neither draws upon nor encourages empirical research on the variable musical attentiveness of situated listeners. Rather, in substantiating ubiquitous music as 'a quality of the environment' (2013: 10) and presenting ubiquitous listening as a singular 'mode' (2013: 9), questions of listener attention are not so much posed as they are assumed.

Here, I would suggest, Kassabian's central point concerning the centrality of attention might be usefully supplemented with insights from cognitive sociology. In arguing for a 'sociology of attention', for instance, Eviatar Zerubavel (2015: 1) has highlighted not only the 'fundamental discrepancy between what is perceptually accessible to us and what we actually notice' but the wider value, for sociologists, of attending more rigorously to the ways that 'noticing and ignoring are *sociomental* acts ultimately performed by members of particular communities with particular styles of attending' (Zerubavel 2015: 10). A comparable effort to link explanations of social phenomena with questions of attention can be found in John Levi Martin's (2011: 239) work and particularly in his proposals concerning the 'need for a social aesthetics – a study of the processes whereby actors take in the qualities of the social world around them' (see also Olcese and Savage, 2015). Martin's concern to explore people's 'differential sensitization to aspects of the world that are there' (Martin and Vandebroek, 2014: 110) connects with the claim that people's actions cannot be explained without understanding them from those people's points of view. Echoing Zerubavel's stress on attention, Martin argues that 'first-person' explanations can valuably reveal 'variation in the degree to which people are responsive to objects', noting that 'if this latter degree varies according to socially recognizable

predictors, this suggests a further role for a sociological analysis' (Martin and Merriman, 2015: 138). When we supplement the perspectives of Kassabian and Small – from which we might take an understanding of musical activities in terms of situationally embedded, relational events subject to varying degrees and kinds of attention – with insights from Zerubavel and Martin concerning the sociological purchase of questions about people's situationally variable (yet likely patterned) responsiveness to objects, we can begin to see some of the ways a trans-actional approach might fruitfully extend music sociologists' interest in the ways taste intersects with power and status to not only engage some fundamental questions about attention and responsiveness but, in the process, revise those impoverished views of listening emerging out of Bourdieusian-inspired accounts which, as de Boise (2016: 182) notes, 'leave the basic idea that . . . the less powerful uncritically and passively experience music, intact'.

To further consider how a trans-actional approach might broach questions of power, politics and ethics, it is worth drawing upon the conceptual vocabulary of Karen Barad (1996, 2007), a thinker whose central concept of 'intra-action' – referring to 'the mutual constitution of entangled agencies' (Barad, 2007: 33) – not only resonates powerfully with trans-action, but in whose broader account of 'agential realism' commentators have discerned notable links with Dewey's later thought (see e.g. Hammarström, 2010; Reynolds, 2019; Rosiek, 2013). Of the numerous conceptual terms from Dewey and Bentley's trans-actional prospectus that find distinct parallels in Barad's intellectual edifice,[10] most relevant to my concerns here are 'agential cut' and 'diffraction'.

Barad uses 'agential cut' to refer to the way that the otherwise indeterminate boundaries and properties of entities become distinct within intra-action. As with trans-actionalism's repudiation of 'agency'-based accounts, Barad convincingly argues the need to acknowledge how such 'cuts' are not to be understood as enacted by individual agents, since it is the functioning of a whole 'apparatus'[11] that, as she puts it, 'specifies an agential cut' (Barad 2007: 148). What this idea usefully foregrounds for a trans-actional music sociology is the need to take stock of the 'cuts' occurring at two levels: one *within* musical trans-actions as these 'materialize different phenomena' (2007: 178) and forge the points of view of those implicated; a second in the adoption of a particular research focus, question, design or method as this both circumscribes the boundaries of any given musical trans-action and establishes a given perspective upon it. The principal benefit of acknowledging the enactment of cuts at these two levels lies in how we might thereby sidestep the illusion – referred to by Donna Haraway (1988: 589) as 'the god trick' – in which analysts adopt a pseudo-objective 'view from above, from nowhere' and downplay the situated knowledges which inform people's embodied, environmentally and historically-located perceptions. Haraway's attention to situated knowledges and the inevitably interwoven nature of ontology, epistemology and ethics[12] connects with Barad's understanding of her work as 'ethico-onto-epistemology' (Barad, 2007: 381), as well as signalling the impossibility of setting aside questions of power, privilege and inequality when attending to the enactment of 'cuts'. An engagement with Barad's linked concept of 'diffraction' helps to further illuminate the ways a trans-actional music sociology might fruitfully engage these questions.

Acknowledging the inevitable entanglement of observed events and research apparatus leads Barad to propose that researchers adopt a 'diffractive methodology' to make

explicit the nature of these entanglements (and the differences germane to them). In everyday terms, diffraction 'has to do with the way waves combine when they overlap' (Barad, 2007: 28) and can be observed in the rainbow effect on the surface of compact discs as their colours change in line with the shifting viewing position of an observer. While diffraction is seen by Barad as an apt metaphor for her methodological approach, it is not underpinned by simple *perspectivism* – the idea that there is one real phenomenon but that knowledge of it is multiple. Rather, since phenomena are themselves multiple, diffraction is 'a matter of differential entanglements' (Barad 2007: 381). In denying the viability of substantialist approaches in which 'one text or set of ideas . . . serves as a fixed frame of reference', Barad (2007: 30) argues that diffraction 'involves reading insights through one another in ways that help illuminate differences as they emerge'. Although somewhat underspecified by Barad in certain regards,[13] diffractive methodology is a mode of analysis 'for attending to and responding to the effects of difference' (2007: 72), involving a commitment to understanding 'which differences matter, how they matter, and for whom' (2007: 90).

Adopting a diffractive approach to musical trans-action therefore means refusing to 'fix' frames of reference ('*this* music', '*this* person', '*this* listening context') in advance of empirical observation and instead attending to the multiplicity of observed events, in line with their varied real-*ization*. Consequently, a trans-actional approach foregrounds 'first-person' explanations of musicking events, while remaining alert to the possibility that for some of those present, such events may fail to materialize or *matter*.[14] Not only do we thereby clear the way for an attentiveness to variegated modes and degrees of responsiveness (including null values) to musicking events, but also a sensitivity to their differential constitution on the part of those engaged. Exploring the constitution of musical trans-actions therefore requires the analyst to follow the trans-actors and inquire into how they bring ways (processes) of valuing, identifying, deriving meaning and otherwise relating into their situated activity. By uncovering the varying saliency of the conditions and aspects of musical trans-actions for those implicated, we can look to uncover connections between people's 'particular styles of attending' (Zerubavel, 2015: 10), their prior chains of trans-action and other 'socially recognizable predictors' (Martin and Merriman, 2015: 10), as these figure in the production of 'differences that matter' (that is, differentially registered implications for social action). In so doing, we might establish a means of uncovering a diversity of modes (and degrees) of musical activity that – although irreducible to either the separately treated agency of 'actors'/'amateurs', the 'structuring properties'/'stabilities of meaning' of musical texts/genres, or contexts of ubiquitous reception – nonetheless stand to provide new insights into the conditions under which, and the processes through which musical trans-actions variously unfurl (or do not).

As the foregoing discussion suggests, empirical approaches adopting a trans-actional approach must, on the one hand, bring an alertness to the ways 'cuts' enacted within research processes effectively render them hybrids of trans-action and apparatus while, at the same time, seeking to rigorously contextualize events and the relations constitutive of trans-actions. In facilitating this, micro-social, processual case studies centrally incorporating ethnographic elements (such as participant observation and interview) would undoubtedly deliver value. In this, however, tools of interpretive research need to be

understood less as windows onto subjective experience than means of helping to reveal aspects of research participants' situatedness within trans-actions. Such an approach implies understanding 'tellings as enactments rather than descriptions' (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012: 127). Data gathering procedures might therefore look to go beyond the reflective, discursive accounts offered up through respondents' conscious cognition by adopting elicitation techniques employing quasi-experimental techniques – instigating 'diffraction in practice' – to provoke revealing interferences and help uncover the tacit knowledge and practical consciousness that often serve as action's guide (Martin, 2010; Vaisey, 2009).

Summary

As the foregoing discussion indicates, a trans-actional approach in music sociology is centrally concerned with questions about the variable constitution of events implicating music. As in all efforts to generate knowledge, while the researcher/analyst plays a key role in establishing a focus of inquiry and wider research apparatus, uncovering the constitutive relations of any musical trans-action requires that the analyst is primarily led by the trans-actor(s) involved. No assumptions are to be made about the constitutive relations of musical trans-actions, about trans-actors or about what they relate to (or attend to) in advance of detailed empirical enquiry. Since phenomena are themselves multiple, we pursue first-person explanations of musical trans-actions' situated, dynamic constitution. It is through such explanations (and their multiplication) that we might hope to uncover insights into not only distinctive modes of musical trans-acting but also grounds for elaborating congruences and patterns in terms of what is going on, for whom and what differences matter. As such, this approach brings the potential to uncover not only new perspectives on what music(-king) variably *is*, but also what musical trans-acting *does* at the social plane. Questions about the ways power or inequalities of various kinds are imbricated in the situated functioning of music therefore permeate this approach, given how these inevitably impinge upon, flow through and infuse trans-actor's processual real-*ization* of musical trans-actions. While music sociologists are hereby encouraged to see micro-situational dynamics as the necessary ground zero of analysis, these remain – in all their unpredictable variability –necessarily linked to prior chains of processual trans-action and wider forces. The distinctive thrust of trans-actionalism's theoretical prospectus therefore looks to build upon music sociology's growing attentiveness to relationality and interaction[15] yet in transcending residually substantialist approaches (that unduly stress agency and materiality), it foregrounds questions about the role of attention and situated knowledge in trans-action, thereby bringing concerns about power and inequality back to the heart of explorations of music's social functioning. In this way, it promises to contribute valuably to the ways sociologists might think about music's rich, varied, complex and ever-evolving relation to the social.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. The works featuring in this festival take the form of 'site-specific objects on the border between land art and architecture' (Kobyshcha, 2018: 484). Kobyshcha notes that 'generally such works are meant to highlight the dialectic relation between an object and the surrounding landscape' (2018).
2. Others within and beyond sociology have written in terms of both the 'transactional' or 'trans-actional' (e.g. Brinkmann, 2011; Dépelteau, 2018b; Dewey and Bentley, 1949/2008; Hammarström, 2010; Morgner, 2020; Phillips, 2013; Reynolds, 2019; Selg, 2016; Spiegel, 1983; Vanderstraeten, 2002) and the 'process-relational' (e.g. Dépelteau, 2018b; Mesle, 2008), when drawing upon similar ideas to those outlined herein. I follow Selg (2020) and others in using the term 'trans-action' to refer to this approach, adopting the hyphenated form to signal its status as a technical, rather than colloquial term.
3. Hennion notes, for instance, that cultural objects are 'more or less resistant' and hold a 'relative autonomy by interiorizing their own effects' (Hennion and Muecke, 2016: 293).
4. The work of foundational figures like Comte, Marx, Durkheim and Simmel could be said to demonstrate a core concern with social relations.
5. Dépelteau (2008) mentions the analytical 'dualism' of critical realism and the 'conflated' forces of Giddens' structuration theory as two examples of co-deterministic thinking.
6. See Rimmer (2020: 122–126) for further discussion and evidence concerning DeNora's variously *agent-centric* and *music-centric* accounts of affordances.
7. In drawing upon Gregory Bateman's anti-dualistic thought, Small's claims that 'mind is part of the functioning of living matter' (1998: 52) and that 'knowledge . . . can in fact be best thought of as a relationship between knower and known' (1998: 55) find distinct echoes in Dewey's refusal to separate mind from matter and processes of knowing from that known.
8. Small writes, for instance, of 'essential features of the event . . . [that] . . . go toward giving it its character' (1998: 76).
9. This term refers, in the UK, to the playing of music on a mobile phone or other portable device in public spaces. As the 'sod' suggests, this is musical activity figured critically by those referring to it as such.
10. Where Dewey and Bentley's 'trans-action' broadly corresponds to Barad's 'intra-action', so several of their other conceptual terms, such as '*situation*', '*subjectmatters*' and '*thing*' parallel the Baradian terms '*apparatus*', '*spacetimematterings*' and '*phenomena*' respectively.
11. Barad proposes building upon physicist Niels Bohr's sense of 'apparatus' in terms of 'laboratory setups that embody human concepts and take measurements' to encompass all 'material-discursive practices' (2007: 148). Dewey and Bentley employ the term 'situation' to similar effect when referring to 'the full situation including whatever object may be selectively specified within it (transactionally)' (1949/2008: 68).
12. As Haraway notes, 'politics and ethics ground struggles for and contests over what may count as rational knowledge' (1988: 587).
13. See Fox and Alldred (2021) for recent further discussion of Barad's diffractive methodology.
14. I am here echoing the way Barad's ethico-onto-epistemology plays on the terms 'matter'/'mattering', in the sense of 'mattering is simultaneously a matter of substance and significance' (2007: 3). Dewey similarly plays on the terms 'mind' and 'minding' to foreground how the latter implicates both *attending* and *caring.*
15. See also, for example, recent work from Crossley (2020).

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