Why Music Matters

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Chapter 1
Music as Intimate and Social, Private and Public

Music matters because it has the potential to enrich people's lives, and enrich societies. But in what ways does it enrich them, why, and in what circumstances? Just as importantly, what constrains music from doing so? These questions, which I seek to address in this book, are big ones, and even they are only one aspect of a broader problem: the role of aesthetic experience in modern life. So my examination of the value of music draws upon wider debates about the value of art and culture in the modern world, and it also seeks to contribute to those discussions.

Music as an example of aesthetic experience raises further questions, concerning the specificity of music. What distinguishes musical practices and experiences from other artistic, cultural and social practices? What is distinctive about music as a form of communication? These issues are addressed across the book as a whole, but in this introductory chapter I want briefly to give some indication of my particular approach to them, before outlining the essays that follow.

The fact that music matters so much to so many people may derive from two contrasting yet complementary dimensions of musical experience in modern societies. The first is that *music often feels intensely and emotionally linked to the private self*. As one writer has put it, music is a set of cultural practices that have come to be intricately bound up with the realm of the personal and the subjective (Martin 1995: 2). This includes the way in which music provides a basis for intimate relations with others: a parent singing a child to sleep; three sisters expressing their love for a fourth by singing to her on her birthday; two lovers in bed hearing a song that they will forever associate with each other. The second is that *music is often the basis of collective, public experiences*, whether in live performance, mad dancing at a party, or simply by virtue of the fact that thousands and sometimes millions of people can come to know the same sounds and performers.

These private and public dimensions of musical experience may support and reinforce each other. Our excitement or sadness at hearing a song can be intensified through the sense that such emotions in response to a particular piece of music are shared by others, or even just that they might be shared. This feeling can be especially strong at a live performance, but it is just as possible when seeing someone perform on television or on YouTube. Listening to music through headphones as you wait for a bus, you might, however semi-consciously and fleetingly, imagine others - a particular person, or untold thousands - being able to share that response. That sense of sharedness is one of the pleasures of pop music, and many people are suspicious of it, perhaps because the feeling of community

involved may seem to derive from sentimentality or even from a loss of individuality. But it relates to music's capacity for enhancing experiences of collectivity, and there are reasons to appreciate that.

Music, then, represents a remarkable meeting point of intimate and social realms. It provides a basis of self-identity (this is who I am, this is who I'm not) and collective identity (this is who we are, this is who we're not), often in the same moment. All cultural products have this potential – films, television programmes, even shoes and cars. Yet music's seemingly special link to emotions and feelings arguably makes it an especially powerful site for such encounters of private and public.

This is where things start to get complicated. The relations between public and private realms have always been complex and contested. But in modern times the private self has never been, in Eva Illouz's words, 'so publicly performed and [so] harnessed to the values of the economic and public spheres' (Illouz 2007: 4). It is no longer possible to sustain the idea that 'private' spheres such as the home and family offer some kind of opposition to, or protection from, a world of public power, with the private understood as 'warm' and intimate, and the public realm as a 'cold', rational, administrative domain. Of course many people cope with the demands of their working lives by telling themselves that their private realm offers a 'haven in a heartless world' (Lasch 1977) and arguably a number of political interests encourage this privatisation of people's feelings of attachment and belonging (an argument made by, among others, Berlant 1997). But in reality those realms we think of as 'personal' – our inner selves, and our relationships with families, lovers and close friends - are hugely affected by the world beyond them, and can be just as troubled as the workplace (see Hochschild 1983). This may be more so now than ever before, as powerful commercial and state institutions in advanced industrial countries increasingly require autonomy, creativity and emotional roundedness in their employees and citizens.

So this book examines the social value of music by exploring the relationships between music, history, society and the self. It does so by offering *a critical defence of music*. Why on earth, you might ask, would music need defending? Who could possibly be against music, other than religious fanatics and disgruntled parents? Well, a variety of people and institutions are sceptical about the relative value of artistic forms such as music compared with other social practices. I mean 'artistic' here in a broad sense: the use of skills to produce works of the imagination, to invoke feelings of pleasure, beauty, shock, excitement and so on, rather than some rarified notion of 'high art'. The social value of artistic practices and experiences, like that of other potentially important things such as education, has come under attack in recent years. Some trace such attacks to the 1970s. During that decade, faced by an increasing sense of economic crisis, many politicians and commentators began to argue more strongly than ever for the view that economic

prosperity should be the central goal of governments and of many other public institutions, including those involved in education, health and culture. This was an old viewpoint, of course, and has existed in various forms since the eighteenth century. But a contemporary version of this type of thinking, often called neo-liberalism, was argued for with particular force from the 1970s onwards, and with great success (see Crouch 2011). Government policy towards culture was increasingly guided by economic conceptions of what was best for individuals and society, and many economic approaches implicitly or explicitly assumed that the life-enhancing properties of art and culture were less important than the goal of economic prosperity. Although there have undoubtedly been strong counter-tendencies, that devaluation and implicit denigration of culture and art has continued. In the wake of the post-2008 economic crisis unleashed by the unregulated venality of the financial services and banking sectors, savage cuts were made to education, library and arts funding in Great Britain, where I live and work, and in many other places too.

This is one very significant way in which the value of art (again, I stress that I am using this term in a broad sense), and of music, has been questioned, and with enormous consequences for musicians and other cultural practitioners, and for ordinary people. There is however another way in which the value of art (and music) has been questioned, and I have somewhat more sympathy with it. Some are sceptical not about artistic practice and experience per se, but about the particular forms that artistic practices such as music take in modern societies. A number of writers, perhaps most notably the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, have focused on the way in which divisions between 'high' and 'low' culture draw upon and reinforce patterns of social inequality, and therefore the dominant ways of thinking about beauty and pleasure in modern societies are deeply compromised. I have some sympathy with this view, because there are good reasons to think that culture should not be thought of as autonomous of society, or of power relations. For example, cultural forms associated with societies in the global south are often considered less worthy than those of the global north, or, almost as bad, are elevated above them on dubious grounds. Such evaluations are surely connected to long histories of inequality and violence. Gender and class inequality infect prevailing judgements of aesthetic worth.

Recognising the ways in which cultural practices are imbricated with social dynamics means that critics are right to be suspicious of certain ways of celebrating artistic practices and experiences. That is partly why I use the phrase *critical defence* of music, because I want to take into account the way that music is imbricated with society and the self, with all their problems.

But in some quarters, a critique of the power dynamics involved in culture have led to a strange situation. Many intellectuals who are rightly critical of existing social relations enjoy and gain enrichment from artistic and cultural experience in their

own lives. They buy DVD box sets, download films and music, and discuss them heatedly with friends. They have strong opinions about the value of the particular cultural products they love. But they seem unable or unwilling in what they write and say to provide an account of how art, culture, entertainment and knowledge might enhance people's lives more generally, and why these domains might defending from the kind of denigration and lack of public support that I noted above.

Alternatively, some intellectuals can only defend whatever they define as *popular* culture – perhaps because popularity among 'ordinary' (or working-class?) people is felt to reflect an implicit democratic appeal. But such uncritical populism (McGuigan 1992) is bad politics and bad aesthetics. It appears egalitarian, but often ends up enacting a reversal of the exclusion and snobbery involved in the preference for high culture over low culture. It submits to notions of quality that may be determined to a large degree by powerful cultural corporations that dominate the production and dissemination of cultural goods.[1] What I want to do is provide a critical defence of music, by explaining why it matters, and to do so by looking and listening across a range of different genres and experiences, including 'popular' forms, but others too.

This is an academic book, based on my own research, and drawing on research that others have carried out in a range of disciplines, mainly in the social sciences, but also in the humanities. The main ones are sociology; social and political theory; media, communication and cultural studies; anthropology and ethnomusicology; musicology and music history; philosophy (aesthetics in particular); psychology, especially the burgeoning field of music psychology; and social history. Nevertheless, I have tried to keep my explanations as clear and as simple as possible, while staying true to the main goal of academic life: to enhance knowledge by providing a rigorous examination of difficult issues.

How then do I mount my critical defence of music in this book? In short, I investigate why music matters at the level of the individual self (Chapter 2), in our intimate relations with others (Chapter 3), in constructing and enhancing experiences of sociability and 'co-present' community (Chapter 4) and in building experiences of solidarity, commonality and publicness across space and time (Chapter 5).

[1] I use this somewhat wordy phrase rather than saying 'by markets' because of my view that markets are not in themselves the problem with modern society, it is the particular way that markets are organised; see Keat (2000). For fuller analysis of relations between economics and culture than is possible in the current book, see Hesmondhalgh (2013).

Chapter 2 begins by arguing that music's relationships to affective experience, to emotion and feeling, are distinctive and are important for music's ability to contribute to human flourishing. I draw on the work of the feminist, neo-Aristotelian philosopher Martha Nussbaum who argues that music, like stories and play, can enhance our lives by helping us understand our emotions better, and that music communicates emotions in a particular way, and can therefore perform a distinctive ethical role in our lives. Importantly, Nussbaum's account relies on an understanding of the self as vulnerable, which is partly derived from object-relations psychoanalysis. I then outline the concept of human flourishing, defend it against potential criticisms, and relate it to artistic and musical practice, using 'the capabilities approach' to questions of human needs and social justice. Nussbaum's perspective is too centred on classical music, contemplative listening, and the cognitive aspects of emotion. It downplays other, more somatic, affective and bodily experiences of music. So, to supplement Nussbaum's account of how music's crystallisation of emotion can enhance life, I discuss the kinds of affective rewards that people might get from dancing to music, and I draw upon the philosophical tradition known as pragmatist aesthetics to understand the contribution such experiences might make to human flourishing. These include revitalisation and a healthy loss of self-consciousness. (Remember my focus is on the individual here, and that collective aspects of flourishing through music are discussed in later chapters).

I then go on to complement Nussbaum's approach further by examining one of the most important developments in social science of music over the last twenty years: a tide of analysis of 'music in everyday life'. This, however, is where I begin to introduce the social and psycho-social factors that might severely constrain the ways in which music enriches people's lives in modern societies (hence a *critical* defence of music, because there is much to criticise in the way the world is). I argue that the major social scientific approaches to music in everyday life, from sociology, anthropology and psychology, overestimate people's freedom to use music, and downplay ways in which music is tied up with social problems such as inequality and suffering. Another, separate problem is that some of these accounts implicitly downplay the importance of aesthetic experience by focusing excessively on uses of music as a resource for mood regulation. So in order to construct a better social scientific approach to music, centred on *music's constrained contributions to human flourishing*, I examine some problems of self-realisation in modern life and their relation to music, and I look at ways in which competitive individualism - which I believe to be an important feature of modern societies - is apparent in people's relations to music. I draw on interviews that I and colleagues conducted with a number of people about their use of music, and relate them to critical social theory. In spite of this emphasis on critique, my overall perspective is not a pessimistic one (though it is one troubled by aspects of contemporary society and culture) and in a final section, I summarise some aspects of what I call music's *constrained enrichment* of people's individual lives.

Chapter 3 then moves beyond the individual level to people's intimate relations, and asks: what means has popular music culture provided for enhancing people's experiences of sexual love? My focus in this chapter is historical and roughly chronological, concentrating on the period from 1945 to the present, and it is genre-based, examining the prevailing ways in which particular genres encoded ideas of sex, sexuality and gender. I confine myself in this chapter to the 'mainstream' popular music genres of rock and pop in the Anglophone world, their various sub-genres, and black musical genres of soul, R&B, and hip hop. I begin by distinguishing my approach from the main ways in which questions of sex and sexuality have been approached in music studies: critical musicology's appropriation of post-structuralist theory, and neo-Deleuzean ideas of rock as a music of bodily desire. Instead, I focus, in line with the approach developed in Chapter 2, on the affective experiences that music can help generate in ordinary life, here looking at how different genres have involved different configurations of emotion and feeling at different stages in their historical development. I listen to a range of musical examples, but the approach remains sociological in orientation, examining the ways in which sexual desire and vulnerable needs for attachment to others become institutionalised into historically changing processes of courtship, romance and marriage. The chapter takes the 'countercultural moment' of the 1960s as pivotal and relates this to the rock/pop division that is crucial to understanding popular music culture in the late twentieth century, and which still resonates today. Against notions that music is valuable because of its close links to sexual freedom, I show that a much wider range of emotions and feelings have been valuably apparent in a great deal of popular music, not only in the lyrics to popular songs, but in the way that these emotions and feelings were embodied in music, and combined with words and images. I trace the origins of rock countercultural notions of sexual freedom in bohemianism's view that personal sexuality is compromised by convention. In doing so, I criticise some major ways in which those notions of sexual freedom were articulated, but I also criticise conservative thinking. What we need, I argue, is a conception of the ordinary pleasures of music in relation to sex and love. (Here, as throughout the book as a whole, my argument shows the influence of certain versions of cultural studies, most notably the kind of respect for 'ordinary' and working class experience apparent in the work of writers such as Raymond Williams). Against rock's rejection of various genres for their lack of authenticity, I show that much (though by no means all) post-war popular music made available a rich commentary on questions of sex, romance and intimacy – and 'commentary' here includes the articulation of emotion and feeling through musical sound. I show this mainly through a defence of popular music's relations to sex and love. This includes consideration of recent pop music that has been lambasted in the media for its sexual explicitness, and scrutiny of debates about hip hop's supposed misogyny. This is no populist celebration of pop however. Pop music has reflected, and constituted, troubling aspects of modern culture: misogyny, narcissism and

excessive sentimentality. We would flourish through music more, I argue, if music addressed a wider variety of emotional contexts and psychic dynamics. The ambivalence of music's ability to contribute to human flourishing is therefore re-emphasised.

Chapters 4 and 5 turn to the question of how we might flourish *together* in modern societies. Chapter 4 focuses on co-present sociability and publicness, and also the related question of locality (which is a kind of extended co-presence). The guiding question is as follows: how might music enhance collective experience among people who share the same space? I begin the discussion by analysing the work of three writers who have made valuable contributions to understanding music's relationships to community and social life. In particular, they offer ways of understanding the social value of musical participation. I argue, however, that each of these writers seeks a notion of community that is not feasible under conditions of capitalist modernity, and is unlikely to be recoverable in complex modern societies, even in more equal and emancipated ones. Christopher Small underestimates the ways in which the Afro-diasporic forms he values are a product of modernity, and he assumes that musical practices directly reflect the fundamental features of the societies from which they derive. Charles Keil draws too strong a line between participations that 'revitalize, equalize and decentralize' (Keil and Feld 1994: 98) and negative forms, underestimating ambivalence. He bases his views of participation on a Freudo-Marxian politics that is too optimistic about human psychology and too pessimistic about modern societies. Finally, Thomas Turino shows such a deep yearning for experiences of (comm)unity that he finds valuable forms of musical practice only in residual pockets of modern life. My claim, in response to these authors, is that we need to look for valuable experiences of sociability in life as it is currently lived, and not aspire to impossible levels of communality. For this reason, I then turn to accounts of the pleasurable and life-enriching sociality people experience when they sing together, dance together and play music together in modern societies. There is, I argue, considerable evidence of rich music-related sociability that should not be overlooked in a quest for ideal forms of communal existence. If music is already, here and now, providing such experiences, though in constrained ways, how might we theorise music's continuing ability to enhance sociality and sociability in ordinary life, even amidst sometimes appalling and often troubling circumstances? I offer three routes (noting limitations where appropriate): phenomenological sociology's attention to the way in which music offers shared experiences of time; ideas from anthropology and Durkheimian sociology concerning a primal need in humans for intense experiences of collectivity; and the capabilities approach discussed in Chapter 2, which emphasises human needs for affiliation, and our interdependence and shared vulnerability. The capabilities approach has the advantage of directing our attention to questions of social justice, and of encouraging accounts of how some social and institutional arrangements might be more effective than others in enhancing music's contribution to social life. In line

with this focus on social justice, I discuss the way in which social class inhibits access to the benefits of amateur music-making; examine what conditions might allow particular cities or towns to develop as thriving musical places; and, finally, discuss how cultural production in capitalist modernity distorts musical labour markets, allowing a certain musical diversity, but inhibiting people's chances to make a living out of music-making, other than a lucky few.

Chapter 5 moves away from co-present forms of sociality and publicness to mediated ones. It addresses the role that aesthetic experience and musical experience might play in establishing relations of commonality across difference in complex modern societies. The chapter moves from philosophy and the history of ideas to more concrete and sociologically informed case studies. I begin by discussing post-Enlightenment hopes that aesthetic experience might establish a basis for people to live together peacefully, across different communities. Such thinking was thoroughly critiqued by Marxists, post-structuralists and social scientists. In order to defend aesthetic experience, there have recently been some efforts to reconstruct an emancipatory conception of aesthetic experience based on commonality across different communities. Clearly, such efforts are relevant to a consideration of the value of aesthetic experience, and of music. However, from my perspective, these efforts (by Rancière and Garnham) lack concreteness and an adequate attention to the institutions that sustain publicness. So, to explore how we might construct better understandings of music's contribution to a commonality that valuably transcends social difference (rather than violently suppresses or dismisses it) I make a number of moves. First of all, given that emancipatory conceptions of the aesthetic are often understood as being based upon the value of aesthetic deliberation, or at least reflection, I examine some of the ways in which people talk about why they value music. The problem though is that the value of aesthetic experience is not at all easily captured by language. So I make a second move: to consider the idea that music's most valuable contribution to collective human life might be to advance political struggles for a better distribution of flourishing. My claim is that music's most valuable effects on the world are not directly political, in the sense of contributing to forms of publicness that involve deliberation, or advance political struggle, but instead relate to the sustenance of a public sociability, which keeps alive feelings of solidarity and community. In this and in other ways too, musical culture develops values and identities that feed into deliberation, democracy and politics in significant but rather indirect ways. The rest of the chapter then concretises the discussion of aesthetics, commonality and publicness by looking at a number of case studies, concentrating on different forms of musical collectivity. First of all, I examine collectivities based on shared enjoyment of particular genres (such as extreme metal) and star performers. Although not without significance and value, I argue, such musical collectivities offer too fragmented a means of assessing music's relation to collective human flourishing. It is to the crucial institution of the nation that we must turn for evidence of how musical-aesthetic experience might fare in

terms of enhancing meaningful community across space and time. I examine case studies of various relations between music and identity in modern nations, concentrating on questions of nationalism and cosmopolitanism. I criticise an account that finds significant musical cosmopolitanism in international flows of rock music. I find hope for music's ability to transcend difference in the perhaps surprising context of Afghanistan. Latin America provides a number of examples of where music associated with marginalised ethnic and class groups came to be identified as 'national' music. Turkey offers a striking example of music's ability, in the right institutional circumstances, to bridge differences of religion and sexuality. Finally, and more pessimistically, drawing on the work of Paul Gilroy, I discuss how the inspiring cosmopolitanism of Afro-diasporic music has been affected by commercialisation and globalisation in the neo-liberal era. Music's ability to unite people across space and time, and thereby enable their collective flourishing, I conclude, is real, but specific, and highly vulnerable to systemic changes, such as increasing consumerism, commodification and competitiveness. A final section briefly rehearses the perspective of the book as a whole.