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CHAPTER 20

MUSIC AND MATERIAL CULTURE

WILL STRAW

In his 1993 book *La passion musicale*, Antoine Hennion noted a key difference between the analysis of music and that of other cultural forms. Those studying literature or art history, he suggested, struggle against the self-evident solidity of their objects. The literary scholar or art historian is up against the seemingly irrefutable concreteness of a book or painting, and so confronts prejudices which assert the self-sufficiency of the artistic object unto itself. In the face of this concreteness, skill and perseverance are required to expose the mediations (the social structures and processes) that made such an object possible, and to convince others that they are of more than secondary interest. For the analyst confronting music, in contrast, “critical discourse finds itself thrown off balance.” Music, Hennion writes, “far from concealing the mass of its interpreters and instruments behind the object that they make visible, is all too happy to reveal them; they are the only visible guarantees of its existence” (Hennion 1993, 13; my translation).

Music arrives in our lives propped up by multiple forms of material culture: instruments, scores, recordings, media technologies, concert halls, bodies, electronic gadgets, and so on. Music itself remains an elusive entity; the very idea of the musical work, as Lydia Goehr reminds us, is an obscure, controversial one (Goehr 1992, 2). The question of music’s materiality comes accompanied by a set of contradictions or paradoxes. Long considered one of the most ethereal and abstract of cultural forms, music is arguably the one most embedded in the material infrastructures of our daily lives. In Georgina Born’s words, music is “perhaps the paradigmatic

1 multiply-mediated, immaterial and material, fluid quasi-object, in which
2 subjects and objects collide and intermingle” (Born 2005, 7).

5 THING THEORY

6 Since the end of the 1990s, something called “thing theory” has rippled
7 across the academic humanities (Brown 2001). “Thing theory” is a self-
8 consciously sloganistic label for a variety of recent developments in cultural
9 analysis which have focused on the status and meaning of objects. Modest
10 versions of “thing theory” have reflected on the role played by objects within
11 such cultural forms as the novel or fine art painting (e.g., Watson 1999). In
12 works of literature, for example, “things” (such as items of clothing or fur-
13 niture) function in a variety of ways: they may serve as the pretext for
14 descriptions which slow down narrative action, enhance a novel’s impres-
15 sion of realism or provide an objectifying balance to a work’s pull towards
16 psychological interiority. Bill Brown, a key spokesperson for “thing theory”
17 within literary studies, asks scholars to pursue the question of how literature
18 “renders a life of things” (Brown 1999, 3).

19 More ambitious and totalizing efforts to develop a thing-centered cul-
20 tural analysis have taken shape within those forms of cultural study located
21 closer to the social sciences. These are marked by models which work to
22 eliminate or reduce fundamental distinctions between things and human
23 beings. A key argument in this work is that objects and humans possess
24 roughly equal degrees of agency and methodological importance. In actor-
25 network theory, for example, or in the media theory of Friedrich Kittler,
26 human agents interact with objects as part of assemblages in which both
27 should be seen as “thing-like,” as nodes or connective materials within
28 network operations (e.g., Glennie and Thrift 2002, 152–154; Kittler 1985).

29 This concern with things, objects, and assemblages may be understood as
30 part of a broader “material turn” in the study of culture (Hicks and Beaudry
31 2010). The “material turn” draws ideas and inspiration from many sources,
32 some of which (such as “material culture studies”) had been longstanding
33 subfields within such fields as anthropology or museum studies. Some of the
34 earliest glimpses of a broader “material turn” came in the mid-1980s, with
35 the publication of influential, cross-disciplinary books such as the anthology
36 *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Appadurai
37 1986) and Susan Stewart’s *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the
38 Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Stewart 1984). In academic fields
39 hitherto preoccupied with the character of texts or the politics of repre-
40 sentation, these interventions invited scholars to think about the material
41 forms in which culture was embedded. Important ideas in these books, such
42 as Igor Kopytoff’s notion of a “social biography” of commodities, would be

1 taken up frequently in cultural scholarship over the next quarter-century
2 (Kopytoff 1986).

3 In the study of music, it is fair to say that this “material turn” has been no
4 more influential than many of the other turns that have left the humanities
5 and social sciences spinning over the last two decades. A turn to the
6 “material” stands alongside “affective”, “spatial”, “cognitive”, “pictorial,” and
7 “computational” turns in a long list of diagnosed shifts whose very number
8 betrays the failure of any single one to bring about a definitive refocusing of
9 cultural analysis. What is special about the “material turn,” perhaps, is that
10 it allows us to explore a range of questions with particular pertinence to
11 the analysis of music. Some of these have to do with the “thing” status of
12 music itself—with whether music itself might be considered material or
13 immaterial, object-like or ethereal. Others are concerned with the range
14 of material forms (the objects and technologies) through which music is
15 performed, received, collected and rendered mobile. Put differently, one set
16 of approaches moves “backwards” from music, to consider the material
17 substances of which music might be constituted. Another moves “forward”
18 from music, to examine the material supports which enable music to assume
19 its social and cultural existence.

22 MATERIALITIES OF MUSIC

23 Arguments over the extent to which music is a material form have wound
24 their way through the long history of philosophical aesthetics, and must be
25 passed over quickly here. Many of these arguments assert the immateriality
26 of music, then go on to speculate as to the particular substances of which it
27 is thought to be made. In her study of British Romantic ideas concerning
28 poetry and music, Phyllis Weliver traces the shifting meanings of the word
29 “air,” from its designation of a particular kind of musical work through
30 considerations of the ethereal substances through which music travels and
31 of which it is made. “Air,” she shows, suggested both the weightlessness
32 or immateriality of music and its dependence upon a material-chemical
33 substance (the air that is breathed) whose composition, scientists thought,
34 could be isolated and examined (Weliver 2005, 33). Here, as in so many
35 other cases, assertions about music’s lack of ontological thickness are coun-
36 terbalanced by scientific or pseudo-scientific claims about a vital substance
37 (air, in this case, ether or electro-magnetic fields in others) which provide
38 music with its material basis and means of dissemination.

39 The most popular recent versions of such arguments center on the con-
40 cept of “matter,” as a primordial substance conceived in physical or natural
41 terms. A strikingly assertive (and newly influential) argument for this kind
42 of materialism is provided in Jane Bennett’s book *Vibrating Matter* (2009),

1 whose pertinence to the study of music should be evident from its title (even
2 if music receives little attention within the book). Bennett's renewed vitalism
3 asks us to examine the ways in which both human and nonhuman forms
4 participate in a vibrating matter that dissolves the distinctions between
5 them. We may find more restricted versions of this position in Jacques
6 Attali's account of music as "the audible waveband of the vibrations and
7 signs that make up society" (Attali 1985, 4) or in theorizations of "sound-
8 scape" in which the vibration of matter is taken to ensure a continuity
9 between musical and nonmusical, cultural and noncultural forms of sound
10 (e.g., Wrightson 2000). Vibrating matter is the condition to which certain
11 forms of music (rock, most frequently) have been reduced, in descriptions
12 that seek to account for transformative impact of such musical forms on
13 human bodies. Bruce Baugh's argument that "rock is concerned with the
14 matter of music" (Baugh 1993, 23) is echoed in references by journalists to
15 such phenomena as the "bone-dissolving vibration" felt at rock concerts
16 (Orenstein 2000). Similarly, Larry Grossberg, in an influential analysis of
17 rock music, saw its political effectivity residing in the ways in which "the
18 body vibrates with the sounds and rhythms, and that vibration can be
19 articulated with other practices and events to produce complex effect"
20 (Grossberg 1984, 238). Makagon's study of high-powered car stereo systems
21 as "mobile heterotopias . . . that challenge spatial and temporal constraints
22 of daily life" refers specifically to the physical, sensuous character of loud
23 music as it acts upon material forms like the automobile to produce an
24 experience of vibration (Makagon 2006, 224).

25 In a variety of musical practices over the past century, the materiality of
26 music has been transferred from musical form itself to the objects with
27 which music is made or performed. In his book *Cracked Media: The Sound*
28 *of Malfunction*, Caleb Kelly describes the practice of the New York-based
29 artist Christian Marclay: "Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Christian
30 Marclay wreaked havoc on vinyl records, abusing them and subsequently
31 redefining them as art objects. He has scratched, sanded cut, drilled,
32 snapped, melted, smashed, thrown, and walked on these fragile and once
33 fetishized objects" (Kelly 2009, 150). Whether Marclay's treatment of vinyl
34 records produces something that we might call music (as distinct from
35 conceptual or performance art) is not clear. Nevertheless, Caleb's book
36 describes Marclay's art-making amidst discussion of a variety of other
37 practices in which the materials of music are destroyed, hacked, distorted or
38 allowed to decay in the name of musical creation. If the theorists of vibrating
39 matter ask of music that it recede into a more primordial set of physical
40 processes, a variety of avant-gardist strategies treat the material foundations
41 of music (or other cultural forms) as resistant forces to be struggled against.
42 As Carol Armstrong has suggested, summarizing one of the key tenets of

1 artistic modernism, “the material dimension of the object is . . . at least
2 potentially a site of resistance and recalcitrance, of the irreducibly particular,
3 and of the subversively strange and pleasurable” (Armstrong 1996, 28).
4

5 6 MUSIC’S MATERIAL EXTENSIONS: MOBILITY

7 Ideas about the essential “matter” of music are more far-reaching and less
8 common in musical scholarship than studies of the more small-scale
9 interactions of music with material forms. This section discusses a variety
10 of ways in which music’s relationship to different kinds of material culture—
11 to different classes and assemblages of “things”—might be conceptualized.

12 The study of music has seen few examples of the sorts of analysis recently
13 fashionable within literary studies and long practiced within art history:
14 those concerned with the representation of objects. Historians and con-
15 noisseurs of popular music have pointed to the important song cycles
16 devoted to such things as cars or trains, but there are few other examples of
17 any note. A “thing-theory” of music bumps up against the longstanding
18 prejudice against lyric analysis in music studies. It must contend, as well,
19 with the fact that such material phenomena as cars or trains (or Heartbreak
20 Hotels) quickly become symbols of more abstract states, like freedom or
21 loss, in which their materiality appears to dissolve. The title of the second
22 Talking Heads album, *More Songs About Buildings and Food*, gained much
23 of its irony from the fact that popular music has rarely been about either.

24 It is more common to look for the material culture of music outside of
25 the musical text, in those technologies and forms that we might call the
26 “material extensions” of music. Very schematically, these material extensions
27 are marked by two predominant tendencies, each with its corresponding
28 body of scholarly treatments. One, the focus of greatest collective interest,
29 consists of all those material forms through which music becomes mobile—
30 through which it is dispersed, scattered across mobile devices, spaces and
31 practices of listening, and so on. The other, less remarked upon, involves
32 those material forms in which music is aggregated, its individual instances
33 brought together in places of storage or collection. Each of these tendencies
34 corresponds to a widespread perception of contemporary musical culture:
35 on the one hand, that music is to be found everywhere, in virtually all
36 interstices of social and cultural life; and, on the other hand, that music is
37 available in greater and greater abundance, gathered up or stockpiled in ever
38 more comprehensive and easily accessible inventories.

39 The idea that music moves, perhaps more easily than other cultural
40 forms, has multiple foundations. It may be based in ideas concerning
41 music’s ethereality and weightlessness as expressive substance, or grounded
42 in beliefs about music’s universality relative to those cultural forms (like

1 literature) whose movement is more obviously constrained by linguistic
2 difference. More and more, claims about music's greater mobility invoke
3 the material forms in which music is embedded—the recording formats,
4 playback devices, and other technologies within and through which music
5 moves. These form the outer surfaces of musical expression, the encase-
6 ments within which music is carried and through which it comes to be
7 attached to other structures and material forms.

8 In their manifesto-like call for a “circulatory” approach to culture,
9 Gaonkar and Povinelli ask the following questions, which we might see as
10 effective parameters for the analysis of music's mobility: “Why is it that some
11 forms move or are moved along? What limits are imposed on cultural forms
12 as the condition of their circulation across various types of social space?
13 What are the materialities of form that emerge from, and trace, these move-
14 ments . . .?” (Gaonkar and Povinelli 2003, 387) If music seems to be a more
15 circulatory cultural form than others, this is in part because the “uses” of
16 music in daily life are increasingly about the ongoing repurposing of music,
17 its integration within ever more varied activities and situations. In their
18 circulation, bits of music come to stick to other material configurations
19 in ways that invite study. Music sticks to contexts of sociability, such as
20 places of night-time congregation. It sticks to other media, through such
21 phenomena as telephone ringtones or computer game soundtracks. Most
22 importantly, perhaps, music is bound to other, human and nonhuman
23 forms of mobility, in phenomena ranging from soundwalks through car-
24 based iPod-docking modules. Portable listening devices, from the Walkman
25 onwards, have inspired a wide range of studies of the mobile experiences of
26 music.

27 It is common, in considering the effect of portable music devices, to
28 concentrate on transformations of the subjective experience of their users as
29 they move through space. Polemics over the extent and character of this
30 transformation include David Beer's wilfully “gentle” disagreement with
31 Michael Bull over the effect of portable MP3 players on the mobile subject's
32 experience of cities (Beer 2007; Bull 2000). Against Bull's claims about the
33 mobile listener's retreat into a privatized space, in which private soundtracks
34 serve to “manage” the experience of urban time and space, Beer offers a
35 more nuanced account of such soundtracks as perpetually interacting with
36 elements of the surrounding sonic and physical environment. As should be
37 clear, this dispute rejoins broader debates over the character of present-day
38 participation in public life.

39 What is striking in this polemic is the subject-centered character of the
40 analysis and the shared conviction that the key effects of portable music-
41 listening devices have to do with levels of personal engagement with sonic
42 environments. With a reversal of perspective, however, we might begin to

1 see mobile human subjects as desubjectified agents engaged in the transporta-
2 tion of music through urban space. Indeed, from a perspective that seeks
3 to map the mobility of music rather than of human beings, bodies adorned
4 with MP3 players form part of material systems that include bus loud-
5 speakers, shop music systems, taxi radios, and other material forms through
6 which music of widely varying levels of loudness is made to occupy public
7 space. If one roving MP3 listener is the locus of a subjective experience of
8 urban sensuality, several thousand such listeners represent an infrastructure
9 (however uncoordinated) for the movement of cultural materials.
0

11 MUSIC'S MATERIAL EXTENSIONS: AGGREGATION

12 The other tendency in the material life of music is towards what we might
13 call its aggregation: its gathering up and accumulation in physical and
14 virtual sites, from compilation discs through hard drives, file sharing clouds
15 and junk stores selling old vinyl. This aggregation also includes the ordering
16 of music within spaces of storage whose materiality is less obvious: charts,
17 canons and the playlists of websites or radio stations. These latter examples
18 show the difficulty of pinpointing the moment at which a cultural form
19 becomes material. A music singles chart is material in relationship to an
20 inchoate, immaterial phenomenon like popularity, of which it stands as a
21 physical embodiment. At the same time, a chart is an immaterial simu-
22 lacrum of a variety of material processes involving the exchange of money
23 and commodities. Similarly, canons and playlists are both the material
24 instantiation of multiple judgments and idealized, immaterial means of
25 bringing order to the chaotic abundance of material cultural commodities.
26

27 In his deliberately reductionist enumeration of the functions of media,
28 Friedrich Kittler invites us to ask, of any medium, what role it plays in the
29 storage, processing and transmission of information (Griffin 1996, 710.) We
30 may ask these questions of the various recording formats which, for a
31 century and more, have served to store and transmit musical expression. As
32 key elements in the material culture of music, formats—like the 78 rpm
33 record, vinyl album, and compact disc—were marked by distinctive sizes,
34 storage capacities, and characteristic relationships between musical and
35 nonmusical information. In the examples that follow, we will pay particular
36 attention to the aggregative features of these formats, to what Kittler would
37 call their capacity for storage.

38 In his history of the Columbia Records label, Gary Marmorstein suggests
39 that the introduction of the Long Playing record in the late 1940s facilitated
40 an international traffic in popular music and its performers (Marmorstein
41 2007, 231). By bringing ten to twelve songs by a single artist together in the
42 LP form, the album allowed performer identities to assume coherence across

1 a significant body of vocal performances. The LP made it possible to over-
2 come the estrangement of foreign performers and foreign languages in ways
3 that the two-song 78 rpm record did not. Each of the performances on a
4 Long Playing record nourished and illuminated the others, acclimatizing
5 listeners both to the particularities of an individual voice and to the broader
6 characteristics of a national musical style. Albums by Edith Piaf or Juliette
7 Greco, introduced into the United States, were of sufficient length that the
8 novelty of the French song tradition for Americans was diminished over the
9 experience of 30–40 minutes of listening. At the same time, Marmorstein
0 writes, the LP, unlike the 78 rpm or 45 rpm single, provided the space for
11 elaborate textual commentary, through which artists might be endowed
12 with a context and through which the broader coherence of an album might
13 be constructed.

14 In this respect, the LP album, as a material form, carried with it a dis-
15 tinctive protocol of listening, one in which a sense of performer personality
16 and generic coherence were elaborated across multiple tracks. The rela-
17 tionship between these tracks, and between the album and its paratexts (the
18 liner notes and images), was in part a pedagogical one, whose effect was that
19 of teaching listeners the skills and dispositions required for their satisfaction.
20 The characteristics of the LP record just described resided in its capacity for
21 aggregation, for collecting together multiple instances of music in ways that
22 transformed the intelligibility of any one.

23 A very different case of aggregation may be found in the MP3-filled CDs
24 which, for a few years, have lingered on the margins of the music business.
25 In the mid-2000s, Madacy, a Canadian company devoted to the antholog-
26 izing of cheaply acquired cultural materials, began marketing CD packages
27 containing two hundred or so MP3s organized by genre. (Examples of these
28 packages include such titles as *Best of the Classics* and the *Workout Music*
29 *Collection*.) Intended for sale over the Internet and in Wal-Mart stores, these
30 “Instant MP3 Packages” were directed at the new, middle-aged owners of
31 iPods and other MP3 players, who were blocked by ethical considerations or
32 technological ignorance from downloading MP3 files over the Internet.

33 We may contrast these packages with the pirated MP3 discs which, at
34 roughly the same time, had come to dominate the street markets for music
35 in Mexico City. I have written of such packages elsewhere, noting how they
36 had replaced pirated versions of individual albums in a context of height-
37 ened, illegal competition (Straw 2009). In Canada, one might buy two
38 hundred “tracks” of classical music performed by no-name orchestras and
39 remastered from unidentified recordings of the 1950 or 1960s. In Mexico
40 City, one could purchase the whole of The Smiths’ back catalogue on one or
41 two discs. In the difference between these two sorts of packages, we see two
42 very different practices of musical aggregation. MP3 discs in Mexico City

1 represented the furthest reaches of an illegal practice threatened by official,
2 imminent moves against street commerce and by the eventual disappear-
3 ance of the CD itself as a material form. Madacy's "Instant MP3 packages"
4 were designed precisely to protect consumers from the slightest contact with
5 practices (downloading or CD-burning) tainted with illegality.

6 At the same time, the MP3 discs of Mexico City street markets accom-
7 plished the transmission through time of an authoritative musical canon
8 dominated by the global North and West. These discs reasserted the cen-
9 trality of that canon and, in the very abundance contained in any one set,
10 enshrined the career as a meaningful unit of understanding. In contrast, the
11 MP3 discs sold by Madacy, under conditions of pristine legality, were full of
12 budget recordings (such as live performances from the 1960s by rock-and-
13 roll stars of the 1950s) long associated with exploitative music industry
14 practices and fly-by-night labels. As such, they served to dismantle notions
15 of the official release or the definitive version. As has occurred in every shift
16 of recording format in the last half-century, this repertory of dubious
17 provenance and low canonical status has been handed down to a new set of
18 entrepreneurs, to be circulated in contemporary material forms.

19 In the difference between these two examples, we may glimpse some of
20 the complexities of the material culture of music. The illegal compilations
21 of the Mexico City street market further consolidate a critical and com-
22 mercial canon by expanding its availability, while marginal musical detritus
23 long associated with practices of exploitation and deception enters the
24 homes of Canadian consumers fearful of any association with music in its
25 illicit forms. At the same time, each class of MP3-filled CD discussed here is
26 engaged in a double mobility: its own movement as a material, commodity
27 form, from places of commerce to contexts of listening, and the trans-
28 mission, through this material form, of a legacy of musical expression.

31 CONCLUSIONS

32 If there has been a material turn in music studies, it has, for the most part,
33 gone unnamed. The disciplines studying music are many, and the sites in
34 which it is studied even more so. The sense of a disciplinary center that
35 might uniformly "turn" is more difficult to imagine in the case of music than
36 in relation to other cultural forms. At the same time, the study of music's
37 material forms—its "thingness"—has escaped the polemical claims and
38 accusations that have marked the material turn in other fields.

39 Elsewhere in the humanities, and most notably in literary studies, a turn
40 to materiality has been enshrined either as a triumphant return to the
41 certainties of a pre-poststructuralist age or as a purifying gesture through
42 which the lingering idealisms of that age have been eradicated. At the same

1 time, this turn has been condemned as a reactionary flight from theory,
 2 or as a retreat from the messiness of the human and corporeal into the
 3 comforting solidity of the thing.

4 If the concern with materiality has seemed less controversial in the study
 5 of music, this is perhaps because, as Antoine Hennion suggested, the mate-
 6 rial manifestations of music are everywhere to be noticed (1993, 13). It is
 7 through its material extensions that music is encountered in cultural life,
 8 and through the specialized study of such extensions that so much of the
 9 scholarship on music has developed. In music, as Georgina Born noted,
 10 “subjects and objects collide and intermingle” (Born 2005, 7). The endless
 11 variety of this process of collision and intermingling makes music distinct
 12 and ensures its continued fascination to those who study it.
 13

14 NOTE

15 Thank you to Caylin Smith for valuable research assistance.
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