

Review: *Music in the World: Selected Essays*

Timothy D. Taylor

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In many ways an adjunct to *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present* (Taylor 2016), Timothy Taylor's previous work on music and neoliberal capitalism, his most recent publication provides a broader theoretical analysis of shifts in music production, dissemination, advertising and consumption in multiple capitalist regimes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By embedding his specific case studies in critical discussions on the relationships between music and culture, affect, and value, Taylor astutely evidences that commodification cannot simply be understood as a phenomenon in and of itself, but is indeed informed by social and cultural context. Combined, the individual essays included in *Music in the World* chart out a compelling theoretical framework for a historically, socially and culturally informed study of music and capitalism that is a most welcome contribution to ethnomusicological discourses.

The first two chapters of this volume problematize the lack of consideration given to culturally specific meaning in many existing studies of music and music making. Chapter 1 revisits anthropologist Clifford Geertz's seminal definition of culture as a man-made web of significances that can be decoded through ethnography (Geertz 1973: 5), to illustrate that both music and its practitioners are shaped by culturally, socially, and historically constructed value systems. Extending this crucial argument, chapter 2 deconstructs dominant Western assumptions on a somewhat "natural" connection between music and affect, showing instead that ways in which music evokes emotional responses in listeners have been defined differently throughout the course of history and in various cultural contexts across the globe.

In chapter 3, Taylor draws upon the rise of the player piano in the US to provide a culturally and historically specific examination of musical commodification in the early twentieth century. On the basis of this illuminating case study, he outlines that consumers became convinced that purchasing music in the form of novel sound production technologies was "better than making it themselves" (53). Several detailed illustrations supplement the text and reveal how this particular marketing strategy became further propelled through advertising and gave rise to a more widely accessible, "reified" music, a commodity that was produced and consumed in the capitalist system. In the bounds of this particular ideology, music was no longer strictly understood as "humanly organised sound", as John Blacking (1973: 3) once famously put it. Instead, it became detached from any human contribution and the social and cultural meanings originally tethered to it. In what follows, Taylor further engages with the problematic co-option of various musics for commercial ends under capitalism. Focusing on the rise of radio in the 1920s, chapter 4 clarifies how agendas for elevating the musical taste of the nation and the recording industry's strive to raise sales figures contributed to an increase in radio broadcasts of high art music in the US. In chapter 5, entitled "Stravinsky and Others", Taylor argues that the growing importance of finance capital and exchange value of cultural forms in the early twentieth century allowed Western art music composers to readily appropriate the music of Europe's Others in their works, while obscuring the actual use value of these musics for practitioners *in situ*.

Several chapters in *Music in the World* deal with interfaces between dynamics of globalisation and changes in cultural production and consumption in the post-World War II era. Chapter 6 interrogates the "world music" label in terms of its homogenising impact on diverse musical genres. This commodification of difference plays out particularly drastically in the context of world music festivals, where artists are given performance platforms on the condition that they succumb to a profit-driven definition of diversity imposed on them by the

music industry. Taylor further prises apart this issue in chapter 7, scrutinising the world music genre as a field of cultural production within which issues of identity, authenticity and branding are negotiated.

In the globally interconnected society of neoliberal capitalism, expressions of cultural capital have become important means of asserting identity and stability. Departing from this key argument, chapter 9 critically evaluates UNESCO's safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage as a way of commodifying cultural forms and introducing them to the market. Just as forces of globalisation and neoliberal capitalism have turned culture into a consumable product, the concept of taste has become commodified as well. In recent decades, this process was accelerated through the distribution of digitised music via online platforms and Taylor addresses this complex phenomenon, introducing the music supervisors that select suitable music for the entertainment industry, as well as the hidden algorithms that manage our listening habits and search preferences.

The final chapter in this volume returns to the Geertzian concept of cultural meaning. Taylor sets out to broaden the scope of this paradigm by considering the value that social actors ascribe to cultural goods as another form of meaning. While he draws upon established Marxist theory to tease out the economic value of music as a cultural good, Taylor equally considers anthropological perspectives on value. He argues that what is meaningful to social actors in particular settings is by no means monolithic, but proves highly diverse and shifts over time. Ethnography is one way of eliciting layers of meaning attached to cultural goods, although we also need to consider that social actors can choose to express what is meaningful to them through other channels – for instance, in the form of online networks, social media threads and playlists. Meaning is constantly fashioned and remodelled in a world in flux, which calls for a socially and culturally specific analysis of musical (and economic) values in capitalist cultures. After all, commodification does not exist as a given fact and in splendid isolation from lived musical experience. Instead it has to be examined in light of its recursive relationship with social and cultural dynamics. Timothy Taylor's *Music in the World* is a refreshing read and a much needed contribution to existing literature, precisely because it embraces what ethnomusicological and anthropological paradigms have to offer for a culturally, historically and socially informed study of music in capitalist cultures.

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References

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