The Popular and the Sacred in Music

Jacob Johnson
Oklahoma City University

Follow this and additional works at: https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/yjmr

Part of the Music Commons, and the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.17132/2377-231X.1249
One condition of late modernity, as literary critic Terry Eagleton once described it, is that the population is divided between those who believe too much and those who believe too little. Belief holds strong in some quarters; a fervent belief in disbelief carries the day among others. But fundamental to even a secular age is the fact of belief: what binds the sacred and the everyday is a wish for something more. Their meeting point promises possibility.

And this possibility is where Antti-Ville Kärjä, music researcher at the University of Arts in Helsinki and dynamic scholar of popular music and religion, points readers in his book *The Popular and the Sacred in Music*. Seeking to break the binary surrounding what sociologist Émile Durkheim held apart as sacred and profane, Kärjä makes the case for music’s capacity to coexist within both polarities and investigates its role in the general collapsing of the two in our current postsecular environment. His is not a book about popular music and religion, nor about religious music per se, but rather about “the ways in which different apprehensions of the popular and the sacred become operationalized and politicized in musical situations” (p. 13). In other words, Kärjä has constructed a historiographical vision of (ethno)musicology that, if taken in the right spirit, just might set the field on fire. Kärjä’s is consequently an ambitious, big-voiced book. It probably bites off more than it can chew. But I think Eagleton’s observation applies here, too, for a fair summary of Kärjä’s book is that when it comes to music we ought to believe more. And, to tell the truth, I have always preferred books that believe too much to those that believe too little.

Kärjä’s project is a synthetic one; its major accomplishment is gathering together a wide-ranging network of ideas and questions and building from them a compelling wedge to drive into the thick of (ethno)musicological inquiry. The argument is rather simple—that the terms we use to organize our world are fraught, and whatever popular or sacred have come to mean falls apart under careful scrutiny—but the effects of this work could be far-reaching, particularly in a field licking its historiographical wounds and searching for a fresh way to matter. In chapter after chapter, Kärjä makes the case that music matters precisely because it cannot easily be contained within conceptual categories. In Chapter 2 he connects the desire to mythologize and deepen the mystery surrounding music with a sacred impulse. Here Kärjä is most explicit in his critique of (ethno)musicology. He is suspicious of totalizing theories within the academy that seem capable of explaining away music’s vitality, suggesting that they are in fact designed to deepen the field’s disenchantment rather than our understanding of the music itself. “The belief and insistence on singular origins of music is not necessarily very different from the idea of a singular religious saviour,” he writes, “and thus may very well tell more in
the end, or the beginning, or whenever of
the scholars than of music itself, however
conceived” (p. 43).

In Chapter 3, Kärjä investigates the
evergreen questions of originality and
authenticity in music, claiming that “the
notions of authenticity and the sacred are
effectively inextricable” (p. 81). Chapter 4 is
devoted to religious values and moral
frameworks that Kärjä identifies as playing
a role in musicological inquiry. Here, again,
he points to the entanglement of sacred and
popular. The popular is “always framed
with ‘implied otherness,’” just as secular
invokes the sacred (p. 90). Chapters 5 and
6 are concerned with identity formation
and political will, both of which Kärjä
finds to be problematically idolized. Not
everything can be political, he argues, lest it
risk subtracting the value of politics entirely.
Kärjä registers a connection between
censorship (which he feels is typically
associated with conservative and religious
thinking) and the sacred, pointing out
that whether or not a religious institution
or figure censors music is a comparatively
uninteresting observation, given that
limiting music’s role or purpose is likely as
old as music itself. Rather, he asks the reader
to consider “what are the acceptable forms of
music censorship in a given socio-historical
situation” (p. 141). Throughout, Kärjä
draws upon an astonishingly wide variety of
music, from jazz to classical chamber music
to David Bowie, to illustrate the dynamics of
his argument. Music functions in so many
dimensions relevant to musicology as a
broker of the sacred and the popular—it is
our best evidence, it seems, of the frailty of
our conceptual language.

So, what to do with music’s refusal
to behave by the standards we erect for
it, especially among those who make
writing and speaking of music their business? On this point Kärjä’s final
chapter feels the most urgent. Again,
he turns his attention to musicological
praxis. “Research fields are dominated
by paradigms and traditions that in the
course of time, may accrue sacred, absolute,
non-contingent, normative qualities of
their own,” he claims, underscoring
that “as a consequence researchers may
forget the fundamental ontological and
epistemological questioning that is needed”
(p. 164). Kärjä hence frames his book
with a historiographical imperative, while
intersecting with a number of central
nodes within (ethno)musicology’s current
network of questions—the political, the
canonic, the ethical. Through all of these
investigations, a central issue ruptures to
the surface: when music can no longer be
contained within our fragile conceptual
borders, what does it become for us? Even
more pressing: what becomes of us?

Such questions may be unsatisfyingly
backward-glancing to some readers, who
may rush to argue that (ethno)
musicology’s forebears have put such
issues to bed. Kärjä clearly suggests
otherwise. But where this book fails to
convinces in turn be what ultimately
gives it legs. The writing is idiosyncratic
and occasionally tedious, the copyediting
only fair. There were times when I didn’t
recognize the field Kärjä describes, full
of investment in the sacred and evincing
little interest in popular music. Within
American musicology, at least, I find the
former to be accelerating but still a minority
view and the latter to be overwhelmingly
accepted, if not the dominant narrative
at the moment. Kärjä also misses
opportunities to expand the thrust of
his argument into a wider philosophical
plain. I was hoping for and expecting his calculus to gather other post-post ideals, whether from postsecular or even the so-called metamodern corners of the scholarly world. Failing to capitalize fully on these robust connections in some ways makes his book more readable, as the field now has a chance to carry Kärjä’s insights forward to a more profound reflection on what, exactly, music scholars believe about music, what the field can afford to believe about music, and how a conceptually free music might give us something new—and if we're truly lucky, finally too much—to believe about ourselves.

Jake Johnson
Oklahoma City University