

The Popular and the Sacred in Music

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Antti-Ville Kärjä

The Popular and the Sacred in Music

London and New York: Routledge, 2022.

ISBN 978-1-032-02503-2, xii, 198 pages. \$160.00 (hardback).

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 convince may 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.

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