Music and Mediation: Towards a new Sociology of Music

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Abstract: After a century of studies, there is no agreement on what it means to construct a sociology of music. From the beginning this 'of' has been a place of tension, not of smooth coordination. If music has easily attracted social readings, there has been strong resistance to a systematic sociology of music whose aim would be to explain musical values or contents through reference to sociological factors. The most vehement prosecutor of such alleged reductionism was undoubtedly Adorno (e.g. 1976) - even though he himself became the worst reductionist when it came to popular culture (Adorno 1990); for him, only kinds of music that are not really art deserve sociological treatment (it is difficult to know if this is more disrespectful of popular music or sociology!). By contrast, the opposite programme - a positive explanation of the ways in which music is produced, diffused and listened to - has been attacked on the grounds that, given its refusal to address 'music itself', it cannot acknowledge music's specificity.

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The sociology of music is hardly a new development. Since the beginning of the discipline, scholars have found music not just "good to think with," but good for thinking through some of their most celebrated theories. Georg Simmel ([1882] 1968), who wrote extensively about culture and aesthetics over the course of his life, published his first essay on the origin of music. Max Weber ([1924] 1958) frequently wove in musical examples into his essays on religion, and he devoted an entire treatise to a comparative historical study of rationalization in music. The alienation of music from society is reflected in the antinomies of musical production: it is tangible as an actual social fact in the relation of production to consumption. Musical reproduction mediates between these two realms.