

H-Net Reviews

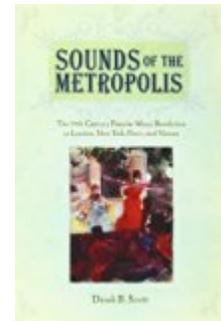
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Derek B. Scott. *Sounds of the Metropolis: The 19th-Century Popular Music Revolution in London, New York, Paris and Vienna*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. viii + 304 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-530946-1; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-989187-0.

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New Scenes, New Styles in Music

Derek Scott's study of the emergence of a popular style of music in European cities during the last half of the nineteenth century is a fine example of the new musicology. Using musical and textual evidence as well as social and aesthetic theory, he examines the dynamism of the nineteenth-century cultural world, arguing, "what happened in London, Paris, New York, and Vienna changed perceptions completely about the nature of popular music, and its perceived value" (p. 6). In other words, the meaning of "popular" underwent a shift: it disengaged from likeability or even sales numbers to describe stylistic components like cheekiness, theatricality, garishness, and physicality. By examining the London music hall, black minstrelsy, Parisian cabaret, and the Viennese waltz as important genres of the new popular music and anchoring them in broader social and economic changes, Scott illuminates how these forms altered aesthetic notions about the value of non-art music as well as attracting audiences from across classes. The emergence of a popular style led to a division in the musical world, as a "new language" with new "accents" made it impossible for a classically trained musician to also master the new forms (p. 4).

The first half of the book is dedicated to presenting the social, economic, and aesthetic milieu of these growing metropolitan centers. The emergence of a bourgeois public sphere as well as commodity capitalism played key roles in shaping new aesthetic sensibilities. More specific changes which helped develop this new popular

music included the growing professionalization of musicians, the growing market for sheet music and pianos, the development of copyright protections, the star system, and the new prominence of live entertainment in venues like café-concerts and promenade concerts. Scott draws on classic work by William Weber and others, as well as aesthetic and critical theory in this section.[1] He is cautious to point out that one cannot map aesthetic values or tastes directly onto a social topography, and says that taste and aesthetics very often served as class markers, as Pierre Bourdieu's famous work illustrates for the twentieth century.[2] In the first two chapters, Scott provides varied and rich evidence, from a discussion of music hall musicians organizing as a labor union, to ticket prices and sales at the various sites where popular music could be enjoyed. He also starts to develop his claim that popular music had peculiar stylistic traits that often were indebted to its producers' hopes to attract broad audiences. Thus, while minstrels wore blackface, and music hall artists spoke or sang in cockney slang, such performers were careful not to represent a black subjectivity or use a language that could threaten or confuse bourgeois listeners. Ironically, music of the people, folk music, was not absorbed into the new genres and styles; rather, as had happened with art music, it became an entertaining marker of locality for an urban audience, rather than an expression of folk culture.[3]

The next section of part 1 focuses on some of the social and political tensions that the new popular mu-

music expressed. As with art music, many critics of popular music feared its morally dangerous potential, particularly in its sly, sexual lyrics, performance style, and the presence at some venues of unaccompanied women. Using the theory of Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, and Michel Foucault, Scott discusses the notion of hegemony as an expression of a class interest that is articulated through aesthetics, but is also contested—by no means is this hegemony completely monolithic, as Scott’s evidence shows. For many middle-class listeners who enjoyed popular music, respectability was a central concern. They were eager to demonstrate how music could be a moral force, and in music hall songs, for example, this eagerness found its way into content that highlighted such values as patriotism, the innocence of children, courage, and friendship. Art music had gone through similar growing pains earlier in the century as critics sought to establish music’s elevating potential.[4] Here, Scott introduces a major supporting argument for his thesis as he examines how musicians and critics drew a new distinction between “serious” and “light,” that is, entertaining, music. The “idea of a second-class music made it possible for music to be popular in terms of style rather than sales” (p. 88). Popular music now was “frivolous” rather than well liked, and included such apparently tasteless flourishes as anvils in Johann Strauss’s “Feuerfest Polka,” and parody of operatic conventions in operetta, illustrated by excerpts from Gilbert and Sullivan. The break between art and entertainment was caused primarily, Scott claims, by critics’ dislike of the new market conditions in the music world, and a new distrust of public taste emerged as “serious” music became the province of cognoscenti.[5]

Part 2 focuses on the urban case studies specifically, devoting a chapter each to the waltz, minstrelsy, music hall, and cabaret. To begin the case studies with Vienna makes sense, since it was in the German-speaking lands that the line between art and entertainment was first drawn in music. Here and elsewhere Scott makes inventive use of Georg Simmel’s seminal essay “The Metropolis and Modern Life” (1903) to tie new urban experiences to the shift in music style and tastes—the stimulating urban environment necessitated not only a sobering and dulling of comportment and social interactions, but also of musical taste. Waltzes exhibited the following stylistic markers as exemplified in Strauss’s works: emphasis on beats one and three; the “pushed note,” and lots of un-notated components like embellishments and tempo changes. As with other forms, it was morally suspect because of the close hold partners used as well as the speed of the turns,

which could lead, it was feared, to a kind of sexual dizziness.

Respectability was also a concern with music hall cockney performances. Scott traces the development of cockney performance through three stages. In the first, performers openly parodied the working-class cockney speech and mannerisms. Tellingly, this early phase was illustrated more strongly by Charles Dickens’s serialized fiction and Henry Mayhew’s ethnographic work than by musical performances. These textual sources were legacies for phase 2, in which performers played “cockney” character-types, most often that of the costermonger, a figure which was strongly influenced by the arrival of Jewish immigrants to London. The last phase of the “imagined real” presented the performer as a cockney character who commented on the genre and form itself—it was an inward-looking, self-referential genre that indicated music hall’s preeminent position in popular music (p. 183). Memorable figures like Dick van Dyke’s cockney character Dick in Disney’s *Mary Poppins* (1964) show the lasting significance of such role-playing performance. Scott’s work agilely follows the transmission lines of popular music styles and attitudes from serialized fiction to music hall lyrics to film.

One troubling weakness lies in the book’s New York chapter. While it is devoted to minstrelsy, the reader finds that the emphasis is placed on European reception of such performances and we learn very little about New York itself. Instead, the chapter gives insight into the cross-fertilization of immigrant and minstrel cultures in London, revealing a strong Irish dimension in the banjo style. From its emergence in American plantation songs in the 1830s, to the founding of the first minstrel troupe in New York in 1842, to minstrelsy’s arrival in London, it exhibited a peculiar style, including the use of “blue” notes, call and response, and syncopation. Whether performed by whites in blackface or black troupes, minstrelsy featured strong conventions that did not really represent black culture. As in music hall styles, not only was there a concern with authenticity, but there was also a corresponding fusion of various influences.

The last chapter on Parisian cabaret serves a dual role in exploring cabaret performances as well as concluding with a discussion about popular music’s connection to modernism and the avant-garde. Cabaret emerged as a critique of the café-concert and its bourgeois conventionality. The new cabaret performers, principally Aristide Bruant, sang of the dispossessed in a blunt, “cool” style that would later become famous in Weimar

Germany via Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's compositions.[6] Bruant and other performers celebrated the grotesque and macabre, which made their style less accessible to middle-class audiences. Here, the connection to modernism becomes more apparent as cabaret was less interested than the other popular forms in reaching a broad audience. As an avant-garde form, cabaret emphasized its contribution to aesthetic progress and like other avant-garde movements, rejected tradition.

Scott's work highlights the fusion that occurred in these new cultural urban centers—cultural, linguistic, aesthetic—as well as a common response to the powerful dynamics of urban change: a rejection of sentimentality, and a turn toward “cool.” Another strength is the continuity he draws between the mid-to late-nineteenth century and pop music forms of the mid-twentieth century, from Elvis to Michael Jackson. His last chapter is very intriguing in its suggestion that popular music participated in the creation of avant-garde forms, and although Scott does not explicitly discuss the matter, it seems that the popular style went well beyond parody into an intentional questioning of reality in music hall cockney performances, minstrelsy, and cabaret, previewing not modernism but postmodernism. Less successful is his subargument about the shift in the meaning of popular—that it changed from being well received to indicating successful sales, and that sheer sales numbers indicated success. These points are not always clearly differentiated from the main argument, making for confusion at points in the text. Also, while he convincingly argues that these new genres and styles are urban phenomena, the book's focus is the broad process of urbanization in Europe and offers little that is new on dynamics or characteristics of individual cities. Scott's exciting work on the rise of pop-

ular music will be of interest to musicologists and cultural historians.

Notes

[1]. William Weber, *Music and the Middle Class: The Social Structure of Concert Life in London, Paris and Vienna between 1830 and 1848* (1975), 2nd ed. (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2003); Tia DeNora, *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius: Musical Politics in Vienna, 1792-1803* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Raymond Williams, *Culture* (London: Faber, 1981).

[2]. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1979), trans. Richard Nice (London: Rutledge, 1989).

[3]. For art music and “folk” flourishes, see Jonathan Bellman, *The Exotic in Western Music* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998).

[4]. See David Gramit, *Cultivating Music: The Aspirations, Interests, and Limits of German Musical Culture, 1770-1848* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Celia Applegate, “How German is it? Nationalism and the Idea of Serious Music in the Early Nineteenth Century,” *Nineteenth-Century Music* 21, no. 3 (1998): 274-297.

[5]. Bernhard Giesen, *Intellectuals and the German Nation: Collective Identity in an Axial Age*, trans. Nicholas Levis and Amos Weisz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[6]. Peter Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); see also Helmut Lethen, *Cool Conduct: The Culture of Distance in Weimar Germany* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001).

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