



The sociology of musical networks

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Abstract

This review examines the current state of sociological music study. It demonstrates how sociologists excel at identifying social networks and survival strategies of musicians. It is argued that the sociology of music is invaluable to our knowledge about the social conditioning of musical practices and the development of community ties through shared musical experiences. Two recent publications, *More Than Two to Tango: Argentine Tango Immigrants in New York City* and *The Sociology of Wind Bands: Amateur Music between Cultural Domination and Autonomy* are analyzed separately and shown to exemplify contemporary trends in this field. These authors effectively argue that music enables communities to navigate issues of ethnic identity, age, race, class, and gender. For this reason, the study of musical practices should not be divorced from their social contexts.

Keywords

Artistic networks, cultural hegemony, musical autonomy, sociology of music

Anahí Viladrich, *More Than Two to Tango: Argentine Tango Immigrants in New York City*, University of Arizona Press: Tucson, 2013; 272 pp.: ISBN 9780816529469, US \$26.95

Vincent Dubois, Jean-Mathieu Méon and Emmanuel Pierru, *The Sociology of Wind Bands: Amateur Music between Cultural Domination and Autonomy*, Ashgate: Burlington, VT: 2013; 246 pp.: ISBN 9781409461852, US \$109.95

This review examines the current state of sociological music study. Two recent publications, *More Than Two to Tango: Argentine Tango Immigrants in New York City* and *The Sociology of Wind Bands: Amateur Music between Cultural Domination and Autonomy* are analyzed separately and shown to exemplify contemporary trends in this field. The authors of these texts effectively argue that music enables communities to navigate issues

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of ethnic identity, age, race, class, and gender. Their scholarship demonstrates why the study of musical practices should not be divorced from their social contexts.

The sociology of music is invaluable to our knowledge about the social conditioning of musical practices and the development of community ties through shared musical experiences. And yet, music has never been a popular topic of sociological study. The sociology of music, if we can claim that it exists as its own domain, is far less united or defined than more traditional sociological specialties. We must therefore ask what a sociology of music contributes to our understanding of the sociality and function of music that is not adequately explained by musicological or anthropological scholarship. The most obvious distinctions are that sociological examinations place music traditions within larger contexts, identify multidimensional aspects of musical life, relate individual musical activities to global trends, and relate music and musicians to other sociological domains.

What elements should we expect to characterize the sociology of music? Contemporary studies in this field, including the two texts that are analyzed in this review, continue to satisfy the following functions that defined Alphonse Silberman's vision of the sociology of music:

- (1) General characterization of the structure and function of the socio-musical organization as a phenomenon which, for the satisfaction of its needs, stems from the interaction of the individual with the group.
- (2) The determination of the relationship of socio-musical organization to socio-cultural changes.
- (3) Structural analysis of socio-musical groups, from the viewpoints of: the functional interdependence of their members, the behaviors of the groups, and constitution and the effects of the roles and norms established within the groups, and the exercise of controls.
- (4) A typology of groups, based upon their functions.
- (5) Practical foresights and planning of necessary alterations in the life of music. (1963: 62)

The sociology of music is, as Ivo Supičič (1987) suggests, the study of music as a social phenomenon, and what Tia DeNora (2003: 36) describes as the social shaping of musical activities, and the social circumstances that occur around and through music. Such analyses of musical communities reveal patterns in collective musical behaviors that demonstrate how various music traditions survive, change, dissipate, or transfer to other communities. These themes will prove to be common threads that run through *More Than Two to Tango* and *The Sociology of Wind Bands*.

More Than Two to Tango

Viladrich brings to tango literature the perspective of an Argentine immigrant who was living in the United States and participating in the flourishing tango scene after September 11 2001. Like many members of the Argentine diaspora, in the embodied and sensory elements of tango Viladrich found traces of an Argentinian fantasy that both kindled and resolved feelings of longing to return. She explains that tango may appeal to non-Argentines as an exotic and glamorous way to express one's individual subjectivity, but for Argentines, it provides opportunities to negotiate immigrant identities and establish membership in the diasporic community. This was particularly

important after 9/11 when New Yorkers actively sought ways to reaffirm feelings of community through a variety of social and artistic expressions. The physical partnership and embrace of tango provided, for some, a temporary sensation of security. This element becomes the foundation of the author's explanation of the expansion of tango studios in post-9/11 New York City.

To Viladrich, the tango tradition is continually being reinvented to reflect the shared beliefs and cultural norms of its enthusiasts. This creates a strong sense of community and emotional attachment among aficionados while also developing a mythology about the art form that has real-life implications for those who choose tango as a career. Data collected through ethnographic and other qualitative methods revealed to Viladrich that many Argentinian immigrants are interested, as she was herself, in recovering their Argentine roots by performing cultural traditions from Buenos Aires. In an increasingly globalized world where everything seems to be easily detached from its origins, the potential connection to one's past through music makes tango a powerful site for negotiating multifaceted immigrant identities.

The racial politics of tango

Tango developed in Argentina as a blend of music traditions including African *candombe* and Cuban *habanera* that were mixed with Spanish and Italian rhythms in the slums of Montevideo and Buenos Aires during the 19th century. The racial and social identities of an ethnically diverse male population of meat and export-industry workers who descended from Europe, Africa, and indigenous peoples were reflected in the multiracial hybrid music and dance forms that became known as tango. When tango transferred from brothels to singing cafes in the early 20th century, new audiences were exposed to the art form. Elite Argentineans and European tourists initiated a process of gentrification and whitening of tango, what Viladrich describes as 'sanitization' (p. 35). An important part of this sanitization process was the removal of tango from its ethnic and working-class roots and the realignment of the genre with light-skinned artists and consumers who were drawn from the middle and upper classes.

Race, as Viladrich argues, has been particularly important to the reception of tango artists outside of Argentina. For many Argentinian immigrants, the perception of their racial classification and the privileges that accompany, or are denied by, their race changes dramatically upon their arrival in the United States. Artists who were considered part of the Argentinian white majority may be classified and subsequently discriminated against as Latino(a) immigrants in the United States. Among the author's study participants, those who were fair-skinned were likely to reject the Latino(a) category and socialize themselves to quickly assimilate into the mainstream white American culture, which they were able to communicate to clients through fashion, vocabulary, mannerisms, hobbies, cultural knowledge, and the consumption of elite commodities. As a strategy of survival, tango performers stress white European/American sociality and elite Argentine cultural practices in order to distance themselves from the Latino category. Thus, the practice of tango in New York City becomes a balancing act of intentional whitening and darkening of tango in order to cater to the mostly white urban elite.

Tango's immigrant communities

More Than Two to Tango relates the migration patterns of tango performers to the globalization and mass consumption of this music and dance. The globalization of tango expanded career opportunities for performers in New York City while simultaneously reproducing many of the social and economic inequalities that motivated these artists to leave Argentina. Tango clubs are presented in this text as spheres where people from different races, classes, genders, ages, and nations socially and physically converge. *More Than Two to Tango* demonstrates how music and dance are a social space from which immigrants find solutions to their everyday needs through a complex web of social networks. The life stories narrated by Viladrich are complex and counter the mythological narratives about the independence of tango performers that are frequently depicted in travel guides and tango instruction books. Indeed, the oral histories that contribute to this study demonstrate how Argentine artists network in order to exchange insider knowledge (social capital) about gigs, visas, affordable rent, and medical care. Viladrich effectively demonstrates how a mix of cooperative friendship and fierce professional competition are deeply embedded in the social field of tango.

Viladrich uses the term 'tango immigrants' (p. 152) to describe a diverse group of aficionados and entrepreneurs who emigrated from Argentina and repopularized tango to the global elite as an inherently Argentinean art form. Because tango artists carry no institutionalized certification of mastery, these immigrants have strategically exploited their Argentinean identities as a form of 'ethnic capital' (i.e., the combination of social capital and ethnic niches) and marker of authenticity in order to gain an edge in the arts industry. This process requires the cultivation of intricate transnational social networks that monitor the art form and aid efforts of artists. For example, tango instructors in the United States often partner with artists in Argentina and rent studios to each other and create branded merchandise and tango tourism packages. Entrance into the tango profession is usually through apprenticeship, which despite the low earnings provides invaluable networking opportunities and insider knowledge about how tango business works within a given community. What is repeatedly shown is that tango is an artistic form, professional identity, ethnic immigrant community, and financial enterprise.

Not everyone has the same chances for success in the tango industry because race, class, gender, and age are contributing factors to the achievements of immigrant tango artists. Older tango artists anticipate being welcomed as established artists, but are regularly perceived as less capable than their younger colleagues. Older artists are more likely to get trapped in low-wage service-industry jobs that limit the amount of time they can devote to their craft as well as their ability to compete in the professional market. This example illustrates a core theme to the book: regardless of the common struggles that tango artists face when they immigrate to the United States, their similarities are outweighed by their racial, ethnic, class, and age differences. Despite their dependence on social networks, tango artists continually complain about what they perceive to be unjust employment opportunities, what the author calls the 'lack-of-solidarity' mantra (p. 170).

Tango sites are presented by Viladrich as a microcosm that reflects larger immigration trends. A primary objective of this study is to prove that that a sociology of the performing

arts not only uncovers knowledge about the creative abilities of humans, but also points to the social webs, informal networks, survival strategies, and unmet needs of immigrant communities. According to Viladrich, the survival strategies arising from immigrant artistic circles present priceless data about resource gaps, as well as strategies that government and private aid agencies might adopt to better target these groups. Tango allows some Argentinian immigrants greater control over their employment prospects, racial perception, and access to resources in their new country. For others, tango is merely another field where social inequalities are reproduced. Among these contradictions, Argentinians in New York reaffirm their birthright to tango, and the author concludes, this investment in the art form makes tango more Argentinian than ever before.

The Sociology of Wind Bands

The Sociology of Wind Bands presents an analysis of the social organization of north-eastern French bands. As the authors point out, wind bands do not only make music, they are important social sites that perform necessary community-building functions. Wind bands have not received as much academic attention from sociologists or musicologists as other large western ensembles, and much of the available scholarship is written from the perspectives of music educators and practitioners with little attention paid to social and economic structures. Sociological perspectives are a desirable addition to band scholarship, and with great insight, Dubois, Méon, and Pierru demonstrate the role that wind bands play in their local communities. The authors find French wind bands to be a cultural metaphor for social democracy and unity. Practitioners of this music are described as modest and good-humored people who share common social goals and worldviews, and whose desires for communal belonging attracted them to this art form. Bands bring people together and assign them different functions, that when combined, produce culture.

Dubois, Méon, and Pierru present an intricate analysis of internal group relations, labor divisions, and power struggles among musicians and administrators. Descriptions of repertoire, instrumentation, and aesthetics are related to the social histories of ensembles, the life histories of musicians, and the communities in which they reside. The authors present wind bands as a blend of popular, art, and folk music traditions. Because wind band music is not easily categorized as serious/art or commercial/pop music styles (which are described as occupying a dominant cultural position among music critics and consumers), it is identified as existing on the cultural fringes, thereby satisfying the criteria to label it dominated by the cultural industry.

The authors embark to prove the extent to which wind bands are dominated by other cultural forms. They ask how this dominated form of music is organized and how it survives when the social conditions responsible for its initial development have all but faded away. They blend structural analysis with a relational approach that accounts for the opinions of the members of each community studied. The majority of data for this project was collected from two questionnaires. One survey that was given to musicians inquired after musical tastes and practices, whereas a second survey asked directors and music society presidents about the social organization of their ensembles. This largely quantitative project was supplemented by interviews and observations of musicians that demonstrate how

wind band participants think about themselves in relation to other bands and genres. These data permitted the authors to explain why the unpopularity of wind band music stirs anxieties among practitioners about the future of this music tradition.

Wind band worlds

Although the title of the book suggests a broad study of wind bands, it is important to note that the authors of *The Sociology of Wind Bands* do not intend to generalize about the social conditions of all European wind ensembles, or wind bands as a global phenomenon. This distinction is clarified in a footnote, 'this book focuses on harmonies; this term is still applied in French and German to refer to ensembles roughly similar to wind bands. For purposes of clarity, we generally used the generic English term "wind bands"' (p. 1). It remains unclear whether this terminology was suggested for the English edition by the authors or by the translator (the French edition, *Les Mondes de l'harmonie*, does not generalize in this way), but this choice in terminology is an important detail, as it relates to the development of their theory of 'wind band worlds' (p. 49).

'Wind band worlds' is a term that the authors adopt to describe wind band practices in relation to other cultural forms. For example, in recognition of their difference from classical and pop music, wind band practitioners have developed social networks, educational institutions, and recognition/awards that create an illusion that wind bands are autonomous from other music genres. These networks, the authors argue, create close-knit relationships that permit participants to ignore the reception of their music. Wind band worlds are shown to reveal two elements of contemporary wind band music. First, the low status of wind band music in comparison to other musical forms seems more pronounced in France than other parts of Europe. Second, the low status of this music is proven to relate to the musicians' social backgrounds. Although many performers of this music occupy the middle classes, they are likely to have working-class roots, and have maintained a working-class ethos. Practitioners are able to maintain connections to their geographic and class origins by returning to the music of wind bands. Through performances of this music, participants and consumers can see and hear the cooperation, discipline, and dedication of its practitioners, what the authors identify as rural and working-class values.

The current dilemma faced by wind bands is whether it is possible or desirable to assimilate into contemporary culture without leaving behind the traditions and qualities that are most valued by their aficionados. As with other lowbrow musical forms, these traditions are deeply connected to nonmusical social relationships. The findings from this study suggest that the social foundations for this music tradition are slowly disintegrating. But the authors do not believe that wind bands are doomed. On the contrary, they argue that what we see in these ensembles are shifts in their musical and social organizations. Middle-class musicians are returning to wind bands, ensembles are opening their doors to women and others who were previously excluded, and external interest groups are beginning to participate in the preservation of this music. Whether this means the gentrification of wind music or the legitimization of lowbrow cultural forms remains uncertain.

Guiding assumptions

Dubois, Méon, and Pierru propose that there exists a western instrumental hierarchy in which wind instruments occupy a lower social status than stringed instruments. They identify the stratification of both musical and social power among wind and stringed instruments reflected in the organization of European orchestras, and this is presented as the basis of the domination of wind-based music. The authors claim that in western music history, 'strings, thought to be more conducive to nuance and emotion – in a word, more "musical" ' (p. 12) were considered more divine and highbrow because of their association with the church, whereas wind instruments lack these distinctions due to their use outdoors by the military. Class differences are also perceived between the orchestral performance practices because 'unlike the bow that enables distance and ease, the wind instruments demand direct contact, and especially for brass instruments, blowing makes playing them something akin to a physical performance' (p. 12). The supposedly detached and less laborious practices by stringed musicians are translated here as highbrow in contrast to the brute physicality and manual labor that cause wind playing to be perceived as decidedly lowbrow in comparison.

These assumptions about the nature of western music greatly influenced the outcomes of this study. The authors consider wind band music to be in direct opposition to orchestral literature and other forms of high art, which becomes foundational to their argument that bands, and the people who perform in them, are auxiliary. From this perspective, preferences among band enthusiasts for shorter compositions, simpler compositional forms, greater repetition, stronger percussive presence, and less frequent harmonic dissonance are all indications of lowbrow aesthetics, which is why so few band compositions were penned by Europe's great orchestral composers. According to this narrative, wind ensembles offer little to the aspiring composer because 'with fewer instruments than a symphonic orchestra and only winds, the bands do not only have a more limited repertoire; they have fewer opportunities to modulate musical intensity and "colour": the absence of strings, which make nuances easier to achieve, also deprives them of possibilities to mix things up in the orchestration' (p. 17). The theory that wind bands are incomplete orchestras is offered as an explanation for the lack of interest or identification with this music by mass audiences. The reader is led to believe that wind band musicians suffer from an inferiority complex because bands 'amount to miniature symphonic orchestras, characterized by the ways in which they fall short of achieving this [symphonic] ideal, the noblest part of the orchestra, the strings, are missing, but instrumental inventions from the nineteenth century that have seldom reached symphonic orchestras are there: saxophones, as well as saxhorns, euphoniums and helicons' (p. 16). This unnecessary oppositional comparison and anxiety about highbrow/lowbrow struggles in orchestras lead the authors to make unusual claims about orchestral and band traditions, such as the suggestion that we can visually observe the devaluing of wind instruments in symphony orchestras in the physical placements of wind instruments behind the strings (p. 12). Such claims point to the greatest shortcoming of this study, that musical practices are almost nearly detached from acoustics.

Social networks and other musical resources

At first glance, the titles of these two books and the methodologies employed by the authors might lead readers to believe these texts to represent different realms of sociology. But because both books are concerned with the social networks of music communities, the sociological study of music permits us to relate the conditions of French cultural domination to transnational movements by Argentine immigrants. Both of these studies prove music to be a collective production, a social network, and a space where participants cooperate and compete for social power. These authors have skillfully placed localized musical acts within a larger picture of the sociability of artistic drive. They satisfy Mantle Hood's (1982) criteria for significant music study, that music and dance 'not be isolated from its socio-cultural context and the scale of values it implies' (p. 10).

If there is one weakness of both manuscripts, it is a lack of attention to sound. None of these sociologists adequately describe music's audible properties and how they affect people in social environments. Yes, it is essential to chronicle the social contexts that surround and influence the production of music, but might we also inquire after the sounds that are produced and the embodied responses that they elicit in social environments? It is sound that distinguishes music from all other creative acts. We need not only a sociology of music, but musical sociologists who understand the elements of music that they are observing, and who are able to discuss the sociology of sound. This leads me, and perhaps unconventionally so, to suggest that readers take the initiative to become familiar with the audible properties of these music traditions while digesting this scholarship, an activity that will be indispensable if these texts find their way into university classrooms. Unfortunately, the bibliographies included with these books will not be very useful in this regard, so I wish to suggest a couple of resources to supplement the monographs.

For tango, an extensive bibliography that was compiled by Jakubs (2003) includes citations for nearly 500 reviewed articles, books, albums, and other multimedia forms, and can be downloaded as a PDF on the Duke University Libraries website. In addition, a video documentary by Neal (2005) that takes a multigenerational look at professional tango apprenticeships in Buenos Aires will complement Viladrich's discussions about the transnational tango economy while demonstrating the physicality of tango, as well as the moves, sounds, and embraces that connect Argentinians to a shared heritage.

For wind bands, the ensembles described in the book do not appear to be distributing purchasable recordings of their music, but several of these bands have uploaded videos of themselves to YouTube, and the quality of their performances are impressive. Also, a relatively recent and easily available album by the Royal Northern College of Music (Reynish, 2000) of French wind band literature includes several titles from the repertoire lists that Dubois, Méon, and Pierru analyzed.

Returning to the initial question posed at the beginning of this essay, what does a sociological analysis of music contribute that we do not find in musicological or anthropological studies? What we gain from the sociology of music is an analysis of social interactions during, surrounding, and through music. Adorno (1976) states that 'a musical sociology should take its bearings from the social structures that leave their imprint on music and musical life' (p. 219). Through the sociological analysis of music

communities we begin to see repeating patterns in social structures and collective musical behaviors. These studies hold the potential to greatly broaden our perspectives about why various music traditions survive, change, dissipate, or migrate. *More Than Two to Tango* and *The Sociology of Wind Bands* should be received as milestones in the sociology of music, and will surely inspire the study of other musical communities. Indeed, it may be sociologists who will unpack the social and economic structures of music across space and time. Such an achievement will bring us closer to understanding the patterns and contradictions of social life.

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