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Antoine Hennion, *The Passion for Music: A Sociology of Mediation*

Translated by Margaret Rigaud and Peter Collier, Farnham, Ashgate, 2015, 339 p.

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- 1 Surprisingly, a long time has passed before an English version of this important book became available, as Howard Becker notes in the back cover review. The first edition was published more than twenty years ago (*La Passion Musicale*, 1993) and there are noticeable differences between the original account and this one, as the author points out in the *Preface*. First, the new version is more focused on the elaboration of a theory of mediation; second, it includes extra chapters drawn from other research outputs by the author that are relevant to the arguments put forth in the book while providing it with further empirical groundings (Chapter 7 – an ethnographic study of a solfège lesson, previously unavailable in English; Chapter 8 – *Bach Today*, with Joël-Marie Fauquet; Chapter 9 – *Music lovers: Taste as an Activity*, from material co-authored by Antoine Hennion, Sophie Maisonneuve and Émilie Gomart). This newly assembled edition gives the reader a more complete and integrated perspective into Hennion's contribution to the fields of sociology of music and cultural sociology over the years.
- 2 The book intends to “re-define the sociology of music, taking as its theme and material the complex relationships between the social sciences and the arts” (p. ix). It does so by “comparing and contrasting the sociology of music with art history, the social history of art, the sociology of culture, and the sociology of arts other than music” (ibid). It develops “a sociology of the passion for music while respecting its specific mediations, not

allowing the instruments of analysis to overshadow the reality analysed". As such, it shows pathways for the social scientist facing the accusation that sociology neglects art and music 'itself' and for the rehabilitation of aesthetic experience. As an especially "elusive object" (p. 1) which strongly resists critical discourse (p. 3), music poses challenges that are particularly demanding to sociology. If difficulties are successfully dealt with, however, social sciences may learn valuable lessons from music. Therefore, by "attempt[ing] to elaborate a theory of mediation from what music teaches us" (p. 1), the book has also the ambition of making us rethink of what sociology itself is about.

- 3 The notion of 'mediation' is crucial and the author discusses the various meanings given to it in different approaches to art. It is useful for the reader to have a clear idea of what mediation is in this proposal of a sociology of mediation. Musical mediators are things such as "technical objects, material supports, carriers and instruments, but also discourses, performance devices: all which a durable art requires."¹ Mediators "are not passive intermediaries, but active producers"; as Bruno Latour writes, they are active carriers that "transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry."³ There is an obvious connection with the so-called ANT [actor-network theory] in the sociology of science and technology, and it is worth taking a closer look at Latour's explanation: "The term 'mediation', in contrast with 'intermediary', means an event or an actor that cannot be exactly defined by its input and output. If an intermediary is fully defined by what causes it, a mediation always exceeds its conditions. The real difference is [...] between those who recognize in the many entanglements of practice mere intermediaries and those who recognize mediations."⁴
- 4 Hennion argues that "the attribution of causality is not a theoretical operation decided by the sociologist" but rather "the constant practice of the actors", and that "the sociologist's task is to focus on these acts of attribution by actors themselves," that is, by the people we study (p. 8). The author encourages us to follow the mediations, that is the links and elements put together by musicians themselves (instruments, scores, technologies, discourses) when they produce specific configurations of music. This principle becomes the solution to overcome the "alternatives of unveiling and naturalization" (in Boltanski and Thévenot's terms – p. 11): the sociologist has neither to disqualify art by showing it is just the "puppet" (p. 117), a mere dependent variable caused by 'social' forces (the only ones that count), nor to accept, naturalize and legitimize art's supposedly transcendent aura and aesthetic discourses.
- 5 In Chapter 1 – *Durkheim as a Founding Father of the Sociology of Culture*, Hennion begins by discussing how Durkheim understood mediation in the relationship between society, objects and individuals, criticizing his principles, considered responsible for the limitations of previous sociological approaches to art, very much because of the exclusion of objects from the realm of the discipline. According to Durkheim, the power attributed by individuals to objects (including the artistic ones) does not really come from objects themselves but rather from what society makes us believe objects do. Consequently, people's causal attributions (e.g. someone saying that an artwork has power upon him) are disqualified by sociologists as mere illusory beliefs.
- 6 The question of causal attribution is, of course, very complex and the extent to which following and learning from the actors' own discourses may or not be combined with a degree of the rationalist 'objectivation' advocated by Bourdieu, Chamboredon and Passeron⁵ is not an easy one and certainly deserves further discussion. 'Objectivation' relies on the assumption that the sociologist is able, through the use of the conceptual

and methodological tools of his discipline, to understand and reveal things people themselves may not be aware of. Triangulation between competing discourses and the empirical observation of different people's practices around a musical instrument, for instance, may reveal that, despite the qualitatively irreducible standpoints and perspectives they represent, some claims about what that instrument *can* and *cannot do* due to its supposedly physical and sonic properties ("limitations") may be considered as not objectively representing its actual sonic, technical and performance features, as these are shaped by some players at a given historical moment and place. That makes necessary for the observer who really wishes to consider the materiality of objects and artefacts to, in a sense, partially 'disqualify' those claims, otherwise sociology might fall into the trap of simply reifying culturally and socially constructed naturalizations that neglect or deny actual material possibilities of an artefact.⁶ It may be thus argued that a sociology of mediation and 'objectivation' are complementary and able to be combined.⁷

- 7 The *Transition – Restoring the Mediators: One Method for Two Programmes* discusses the place of mediation for art history, social history of art, and sociology. "Art history lavishly multiplies the mediations that exist between art and the most varied aspects of the reality surrounding it", whereas sociology ended up falling into sociologism, "eliminat[ing] [mediators]" and collapsing everything into the "social causes" it reveals (presenting them as the only 'true' and 'valid' independent variables) (p. 42). Traditionally, sociology has been somewhat "aggressive" in the use of mediators, mobilizing only the ones it needs (patrons, markets, institutions) to disqualify or "interrupt the beliefs of the actors"; afterwards, when mediators are not needed anymore, it is "ruthless" in "obliterating" them (p. 43). "Since the search for causes inevitably entails challenging those of the actors themselves, it was only natural for critical epistemology to welcome sociology into its bosom," as "demystification is intrinsic to [sociology's] logic" (ibid.). "Some, especially sociologists, maintained that art was 'merely' the mark, the reflection, or the denial of the social" (p. 41). Hennion argues that despite "weak on theory", art history is "ultra-sensitive to mediation." Therefore, even if it placed itself "under the moral authority of aesthetics" (p. 44), that discipline is a valid model for the "restoration" of mediators in sociology (p. 42).
- 8 Chapters 2 to 5 give us a comprehensive and critical overview of various approaches to art. *Before Mediation: Social Readings of Art* traces the evolution of the sociology of art since its beginning, and *Sociology and the Art Object: Belief, Illusion, Artefacts* further discusses the role of objects – sociology's "forbidden fruit" (p. 98) – concluding that "without a full theory of mediation, objects cannot be conceived in social terms" (p. 100). *The Social History of Art: Reinserting the Works into Society* tells how the "enormous task of restoration of mediators who come between the art object and the subject of taste begun" and how, in doing so, the art world started to be "repopulate[d]" (p. 117). *The New History of Art: The Social in the Art Work* gives us further details about how mediators were being approached. *The Transition – Linear causes or circular causalities* (p. 153) develops the issue of the causalities involved in the mediations through which complex links between the 'social' and the 'artistic' emerge.
- 9 Chapter 6 – *The Baroque Case: Musical Upheavals* marks the beginning of the empirical part of the book and explores the competing tastes, mediations, modes of performance ('On the equality of Crotchets' – p. 182), and controversy around the notion of 'authenticity' in the movement of re-interpretation of early music. *The Transition – 'Unhappy Music 'Which Fade[s] Away as Soon as it is Born'...: Painting-and-Objects versus Music-and-Society?* draws a

comparison between music and painting that is helpful to understand the specificities of music as a research object.

- 10 'What can you hear?' (Chapter 7) is an ethnographic study of a *sofège* lesson and makes available in English, for the first time, material that existed in French only. It deals with the interesting question of how, during a *sofège* class, occurs the shift from indifference to "the dual process which allows sounds to be recognised as musical by young musicians, and musicians to achieve musical recognition for their ability to hear sounds" (p. 221). Methodologically, it shows "how can we speak of what goes on in a classroom" when we observe it "with a cold eye, without assuming a priori that we know the object of the gathering" (p. 222).
- 11 The *Transition – Music as a theory of mediation* presents the revolutionary idea that music, because it only appears as a result of mediations, is itself a form of – and a template for – sociology: "music does not need sociology. Music is a sociology" (p. 246). The influence of the Tardian notion of the 'social' as an assemblage of heterogeneous elements is evident here.⁸
- 12 In this new edition, Chapter 8 is *Bach Today*, a text by Hennion and Fauquet which shows how the construction of the greatness of Bach took place in France between 1800 and 1885. Instead of looking at music history retrospectively from today's standpoint, this "genealogy of greatness" (p. 249) analyses the historical processes that happened throughout the 19th century to show that Bach does not merely fit into our love for 'great' music, but rather was simultaneously a tool for and a privileged object of the construction of that same musical passion for 'serious' music.
- 13 The brief *Intermezzo* is a personal account of a rock concert ('A Sociologist at the Zénith Concert Hall...'), and focuses on how a state of engagement with (and into) the event emerged in the observer. Interesting to note is the hybrid tone between the detached sociologist who is aware of his own taste and 'brackets' it out to prevent himself from making aesthetic judgments about the music being playing, and the personal tone through which he assumedly intends to understand the mechanisms of engagement as an audience member.
- 14 Before the conclusion of the book, *Music Lovers: Taste as an activity* proposes a "pragmatics of musical passion" that conceives taste as reflexive performance (p. 279). The author discusses the role of objects of taste *versus* the social construction of that same taste: neither the importance of objects' properties should be disqualified as the mere effect of illusory beliefs of people, nor an objectivist view (where taste would be a mere consequence of the physical properties of the objects) should be taken. "By being socially constructed, the object does not cease to exist" but on the contrary "becomes more present" (*ibid.*). This reminds us of the previous discussion about the types of causality between the social, objects and art. The stress on aesthetic materials' capacity to act upon us (agency) finds resonance in Witkin and DeNora's and the Exeter school 'in-action' perspective,⁹ while the importance given to the material agency of objects reminds us not only of ANT, to which Hennion is closer, but also of Pickering¹⁰ in the sociology of science and technology.
- 15 Hennion argues for the need to take a step beyond the dual world of, "on the one hand, autonomous but inert things and on the other, pure social signs" and into "a world of mediations and effects in which they are produced together, one by the other, the body that experiences the taste and the taste for the object, the society which loves and the

repertoire of loved objects” (ibid.). Taste is reflexive and not merely an ‘empty’ social variable, “it is not given” but “has to arise” by “discovering oneself as a taster through detailed and repeated contact with that which was not perceived” (ibid). This is why sociology must not neglect, or take for granted, the objects and mechanisms through which taste is produced – aspects often too opaque in Bourdieusian approaches. Again, music as a sociological object has something to teach the social sciences, because “what great music lovers enable us to see more easily, owing to their high level of engagement in a particular practice, is a range of social techniques that make us able to produce and continuously adapt to a creative relationship with objects” (p. 279).

- 16 The *Conclusion* sums up the arguments of the book, while discussing what music is (e.g. a relation or an object? – p. 281) and reaffirms one of its main points: music as a model for a new sociology of mediation. The *Epilogue* ‘*Vor deinen Thron...*’, named after a well-known J. S. Bach chorale (‘Before Thy Throne’) may be read, I suggest, as a poetic metaphor for the refusal to disqualify aesthetic experience: this is God’s but also Music’s Throne. Music may be defined as a “collective formulation of a lack, thus transformed into the designation of an inaccessible object” (p. 299). More than sounds, motives and themes, music may be seen as the silence, “the passage”, “the void that links between two sounds” (p. 301) – like the passing from each chorale chord to the next. Music appears only momentarily in time, as a result of mediations, of the putting together of different elements (scores, instruments, musicians, sound reproduction technologies, recordings, etc.).
- 17 In Hennion’s rehabilitation of aesthetic experience, there is perhaps, occasionally, the shadow of a somewhat Romantic(?) epistemology of music that conceives it as immaterial and transcendent, as something that does not exist (“Such is music”, “not to present a work, but to represent its absence”, p. 299; “G G A B. How serene is this modest movement needing no object, and entirely inhabited by this lack”, p. 301). However, it may be argued that this would be precisely a consequence of following ethnomethodologically a collective definition of ‘music’ created by society and musicians themselves (and partially, again, a poetic reflection of author’s own subjective musical experiences?). The *Passion for Music* is, nevertheless, essentially a project for an empirical – and materially grounded – music sociology that observes how links between mediators emerge in the real and hybrid world of bodies and objects, rather than supposing them. As such, it is a valuable resource for approaching configurations of music ‘itself’.¹¹
- 18 The *Passion for Music* represents a very important step for, borrowing De La Fuente’s words, “putting art back into social science approaches to art” through a “new sociology of art”¹² that fills-in the void left open by other important sociological approaches which have been fundamental for defining the discipline, namely the ones of Howard Becker and Pierre Bourdieu respectively.¹³ These tended to neglect important specificities of art, missing crucial aspects of their object – even if we must acknowledge and never underestimate all they have revealed to us through their profane, down-to-earth and detached gaze that treated art just like any other kind of social activity.
- 19 This book, in this new, more focused and very well translated version that includes other relevant material from Hennion’s output, stands as a classic, a substantial and influential contribution to the development of a sociology that does exempt itself from the task of approaching art or music ‘itself’ (whatever that may be), and for a cultural sociology that does not black box aesthetic materials and experiences but rather brings them to light.

NOTES

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