Review – International Relations, Music and Diplomacy

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International Relations, Music and Diplomacy: Sounds and Voices on the International Stage
Edited by C. Prévost-Thomas and F. Ramel
Palgrave Macmillan/Springer Nature, 2018

Scholarship on audible-world themes in IR is always a treat. In this edited volume Western classical art music traditions are the primary focus and nation-state representatives the dominant players. Despite the limited scope in time, place, and music making covered, 10 case studies offer fascinating insights into how diplomatic corps, in the olden days and nowadays, press certain musics into service. This volume contributes to explorations of the *scholarly* intertwining of inquiries into the performing arts, (popular) culture, and IR as *conjoined* fields of study (Rai, Jestrovic, Gluhovic, and Saward, 2021).

Claims

In their introduction, the editors present the *acoustic*, *cultural*, and *aesthetic* turns at the intersection of literatures enabling IR scholars to make the epistemological leap into socio-musicological treatments of politics (pp.2-4). Two core terms – *music* and *politics* – are tightly bounded, however, by their respective classical traditions in this would-be "new" field demarcated by a narrow collection of (self-referential) sources. Much less attention is paid to developments emerging from debates between competing schools of IR and music theory. Perhaps this is asking too much given the focus is on how "sounds and voices are not restricted to music per se" (p.7) by positing *scenes* as a conceptual continuity device. The editors then gingerly step over the most slippery of these terms, *music* (pp.4-5), as they echo – rather than engage with – moves away from the sonic reductionism of mainstream musicology (Barrett 2016). In this rendition music as a *scene* is tantamount to *movement* and, ipso facto, *music* becomes synonymous with "movements in international relations defined as scenes" (p.5). This tautology foregoes the need for contributors to articulate their own core concepts let alone extrapolate on empirical details for potentially *heterophonic* discussions (Said 1992).

Ideas about *scenes* as *subcultures* with their respective identity politics and repertoires of taste and style (a major theme in cultural studies and popular music research) do not make this introduction or the classicist playlist of most chapters. There are two exceptions: The shenanigans around the EU's annual celebration of 'Euro-Pop', the *Eurovision Song Contest* from Vuletic (Chapter 10) and Chapter 6 from Mahiet where jazz repertoires make a guest appearance. Mahiet evokes another conceptual move that the introduction overlooks: *musicking*, a radical and influential reconceptualization of music-in-the-making (Small 1998). These two chapters underscore a fourth theoretical shortcut: the lack of engagement with work from the other side of "the wall" (Griffiths 2010: 166) from *popular/world music* studies and "Post-Third Debate" scholarship at the music-politics nexus.

These absences have analytical implications given a timeframe that traces the shift away from Anglo-European musico-cultural hegemony to that of the US through American corporate control of the global "Culture Industry" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972). This shift is evident in Chapter 8 where Gribenski reconstructs successful American lobbying during international negotiations to have the frequency of A-440Hz adopted as the universal standard for instrumental tuning: "Concert Pitch". How 'true' pitch becomes a tool of techno-economic power underscores the historical situated-ness of modernist quests for standardization across cultural time and space. Many musical

cultures, western also, know that playing 'in tune' is relative in practice (Brownstein 2015: 87-88). Farraj and Shumays (2019) in their study of *maqamat* musicalities in the Arabic world – comprising deeply influential, border defying and culturally diverse "sounds and voices" (p.7) – have much to offer some of the archive-based chapters. Yet these prescient cultural interconnections need to be read between the lines; e.g. in Chapter 5 where Ahrendt cites pundits from two centuries ago waxing lyrically on how the sound of the *viola da gamba* epitomizes an aesthetically pleasing diplomacy. That the origins of this instrument straddle European and Arab/North African musical cultures is overlooked in this literary reconstruction of ethnocentric, solipsistic correspondence.

Limits and Potential

Such reservations aside, these studies do show how certain sorts of musicianship, performance cultures, and styles have become grist to the Western diplomat's mill during, and since the heyday of the Westphalian State System.

Closer to living memory of major shifts in the geocultural politics of "world order" Pundziūtė-Gallois (Chapter 11) looks at what Russian compositions came to represent in newly independent Baltic states after 1989. Crucial musico-historical nuance is missing here too: e.g., when evoking Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975) as the exemplification of these tensions given the precariousness of Shostakovich's situation working under Stalin. The tendency to reproduce clichés is also present in references to Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827), who features in nearly half the chapters. These two musicians' complex musico-political legacy is refracted through populist and learned (mis-) appreciation of their work as powerbrokers continue to instrumentalize their art for any number of agendas.

Two contributions do leave this Anglo-Euro-American orbit. Buch and Fléchet (Chapter 9) cover international mobilization around the Argentinian military government's persecution of concert pianist and communist activist, Miguel Ángel Estrella in the 1970's. Chapter 7, from Cornago, is an account of the "post" colonial activities, in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, of two prominent figures in the French avant-garde, Pierre Boulez and Pierre Schaeffer. The emphasis is on Schaeffer, a pioneer of Western European electronic music technologies. Cornago reconstructs Schaeffer's engagement – as engineer rather than composer – in Senegal during decolonization. The post-colonial stakes in these *outre-mer* projects could have been more productively elucidated with reference to those – thinkers, political leaders, and artists – who sought to link decolonialization to anti-racism movements at the intersection of nation-building and social justice/civil rights projects after empire: e.g., Aimé Césaire, Miriam Makeba, Gwendolyn Brooks, Nina Simone, and Lorraine Hansberry.

Mind The Gaps

There is more to say about what this volume overlooks and offers: First, it is based in non-English language scholarship, a welcome move away from Anglo-American androcentrism. Second, it takes seriously an understanding of diplomacy as a profession and community of practice constituted by intersubjective dynamics, professional networks, and personal passions. These chapters reveal how much work goes into shaping the arts in the image of any political project.

In the conclusion, Gienow-Hecht does acknowledge some of the above lacunae. Her objective, however, is to argue that the notion of *nation branding* best resolves a "profound messiness of the field" (p.262). Indeed these absented historic-cultural parallels have a bearing on a volume staking the cornerstone claims it does for its own, self-defined field. Passing references to the role that other musico-cultural modalities have for any notion of "musical diplomacy" are insufficient, even if any edited volume is, by definition, a curatorial enterprise. This one presumes the universalism of its delimited repertoire, a conceptual insouciance that doesn't do justice to the weight of empirical scholarship evident in the chapters.

Some examples, barely mentioned when not muted, should suffice to underscore the pressing need to consider the geocultural complexity of such investigations. First, artists from the Brazilian *Tropicalismo* musico-artistic movement like Gilberto Gil, Minister of Culture under former President Lula da Silva (2003-2008), epitomize how musico-diplomacies constitute the multivalent, indeed contested sonics, performativities, and ensembles available to state representatives at home, and abroad. Second, archival reconstructions need to bear in mind how tastes – in

diplomatic and musical terms – can change, even for self-appointed powerbrokers: e.g., evident in a brief mention of the latest in US-government funded projects to promote American "cultural freedom" abroad, through what Mark Katz calls "Hip-Hop Diplomacy".

Third, while the classical music world raged at Estrella's imprisonment in Argentina, Fela Kuti and his countercultural community – the Kalakuta Republic – were being brutally suppressed by the Nigerian military. Kuti's defiant art, immortalized by the track "Zombie" (1977), has come to epitomize de-colonial imaginaries. Moreover, Kuti's merging of "old" African and "new" African American musicalities alongside his fame as a political dissident underscores the forging of *transnational* networks of musico-cultural responses to post-colonial and (post-) Cold War authoritarianisms. Kuti's cultural diplomacy lies at the intersection of African/Afro-Caribbean/African American experiences, before and since empire and slavery, audible and tangible in successive "movements" of *Afrobeat*.

Fourth, in the 1960's, Léopold Sédar Senghor, poet and the first president of independent Senegal was bringing leading African American musicians (e.g. Duke Ellington), and US Heads of State, to Dakar, leading up to the *First World Festival of Negro Arts* in 1966 (Ripert 2021). Despite the cultural inclusiveness of multilateral institutions such as the UNESCO, where the shifting geopolitics of (Anglo-American) funding impact on these organizations' global standing, the sounds and voices of these *Others* are rendered mute in this assemblage as it disingenuously reaffirms diplomacy 'Western-Style'.

Other Musics, Diplomacies, Stages that Matter

Given the timeline undergirding this volume, the above counter-examples highlight how remiss it is to keep ignoring the integral contribution that Black/Arab /Asian musical cultures play in international affairs as musico-cultural undertakings (Gilroy 1993, Said 1994). As Aniruddha Das argues these *political frequencies*, as ripostes to overt and covert forms of race/class/gender, and religious oppression, resonate through any music making "scene".

Perhaps this could be the next project; joining others engaged in addressing politics and/as music as necessarily "messy" domains: e.g. there are ambassadors who play a mean electric guitar, not all international events have string quartets or jazz soundtracks as background music. Some dance to ABBA (1974 Eurovision winners) tribute bands. We would then need to engage fully with musico-political encounters across the geocultural spectrum of the non-Western world: e.g., centuries of cultural 'reimportations' between "West" and "East" (Frankopan 2015) that artists like Sheena Ringo make their own. This updated repertoire would also include the formidable sensibilities that musico-diplomatic representatives from South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, and the Asia-Pacific region have brought to these many, other "sounds and voices on the international stage".

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