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### Music – Why it Matters

By Nicholas Cook,  
Reviewed by Wolfgang Hartmann



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## Reviews of Publications

### **Music – Why it Matters**

by **Nicholas Cook**

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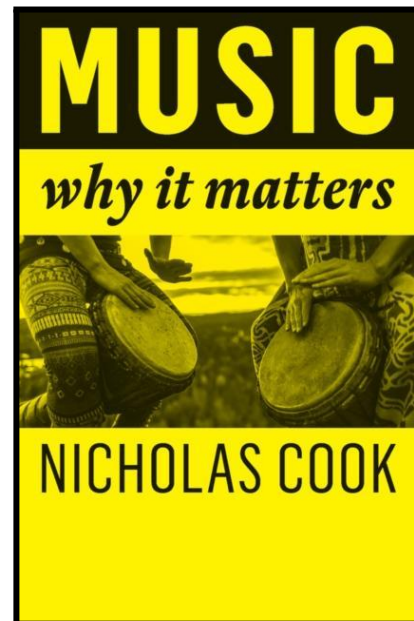
*Reviewed by Wolfgang Hartmann*

The title may attract the attention of music teachers. As they own an “endangered subject” they always look for reasoned arguments for their eternal fight against further cutting of hours in the school curriculum. The rhetorical reversal of the first chapter heading “Or maybe it doesn’t?” makes it even more interesting...

But these expectations will not be met. The author (a known British musicologist, who taught at the University of Cambridge, where he is Fellow of Darwin College) will not deal with didactic problems of music education. Of course he is aware of the problem that music education in school is a subject “increasingly undervalued by comparison with literacy, numeracy, and subjects seen as directly enhancing employability and economic growth.” The author, rather, is looking at the whole – alternately taking a bird’s eye view and then zooming microscopically down on details. In a multi-faceted description he makes aware, how and in what different places music is present in our world. Of course, the general term “music” has to be seen in its multiple appearances: There is the difference between so-called aesthetic and applied music (in extreme “to fill empty restaurants with music...”), distinctions in style and form of presentation as oral vs. literate, black vs. white, jazz vs. classical, improvised vs. composed, collective vs. authored music.

But in order to understand which role (or better, which different roles) music plays in the world, also “the world” is carefully assessed. It includes a look at the impact of racial and gender-oriented issues, production mechanisms and corporate structures. The examples are always taken out of the daily perception with permanent references to the political and social reality. Neither Brexit (including even Boris Johnson) nor the Covid 19 experiences are missing (The examples are also understandable for non-British readers or can be replenished with their own political experiences}.

Music is portrayed in 11 chapters (“Music for Good and Ill”, “Ideology in Disguise”, “Music, Race, Empire” ... “Musical Togetherness” ...). The focus is on its historical development, on its traditional hierarchical structures and communication systems in ensembles, and on its different ways of performing (reactivating Christopher Small’s classical term of “musicking”). It would be difficult to go deeper into details of each chapter as every shortening of the trains of thoughts would inevitably lead to misunderstanding.



The author offers a wide spectrum of opinions, giving also space for extreme points of view, which “associate classical music with ‘a nostalgia for ... pre-democratic orders of government’” (Adlington, Buch); or the idea of comparing city planning (the cooperation between designer and executing engineer) with the working structure of a classical symphonic orchestra (“strict allegiance to the composer’s score and obeisance to the hierarchical command of the conductor”, Rowan). Nicholas Cook however rejects this “old-fashioned image of the all-powerful conductor” and reminds us that “good ensembles depend more on musicians listening to one another than on magisterial baton technique”.

Music has the power – comparable with a smell which brings us straight back to places and events from childhood – to remember emotionally charged occasions. This counts especially for the type of music which was consumed by people “during the years when they were forming their self-identity”. Music also can lead us into past times, like Ravel’s *La Valse* evoking Vienna in the mid-nineteenth century. Also Carl Orff’s *Carmina Burana*, using texts from a mediaeval poetry collection is mentioned as an example. But it surprises us to find Carl Orff’s composition labelled as based on “pseudo-mediaeval chant, late Renaissance melodies (?), and a dash of Stravinsky to create an idealised image of the Middle Ages.” We can suppose that Carl Orff indeed wanted to create a fantasy ambience (in the subtitle of *Carmina Burana* it reads “*atque imaginibus magicis*” meaning that the dance performance should create a magic atmosphere). But there was surely no intention to fake any historic style (neither in his mediaeval nor in his Ancient Greek rooted works). His personal musical language (*Elemental Music*) derives mainly from the fact that he put the rhythm of the words in the centre. And the use of the stylistic vocabulary of his time (like Stravinsky and others did) should be just natural (does Mozart’s music also have “a dash” of Haydn – or vice versa?).

Nicholas Cook avoids any fanciful or even impassioned comment about music. He even asks the reader to be realistic: “Music is not a magic bullet. Ethical values don’t seep from sound to social behaviour... so any amount of listening to music – or even playing it – is in itself unlikely to make you a better member of society”.

The (positive) effects however can appear on the long run: Music making on all stages “creates socialites with highly desirable, human characteristics that range from recognition of the other and mutual care and trust to the resilience that results from its basis in acts of mutual listening”. Remarkable is the quote of Michael Tree, member of the Guarneri Quartet about the group experience on stage: “There is an element of the unknown in the performance... that mandates the same kind of mutual trust as exists between mountaineers roped together”.

Music “is agency and freedom *in relation to other people*, in short a relative and relational freedom that creates space for others”. There are still many more thoughts, considerations and conclusions in this book which would be worth quoting here...

The book “Music – why it matters” presents a thorough research on the question how music in its different appearances is woven in our personal, social, public, and administered life. Due to the concept of research Nicholas Cook only explains “how it is”, portraying and

analysing the situation, but he does not give advice. However, he may inspire music teachers to draw conclusions from his findings. They will confirm “why it matters” that children have a creative exposure to music; that it matters to experience music and dance together in order to “create socialites with highly desirable, human characteristics...”.

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