

Book Review

Title: *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music*

Editors: Neil Lerner and Joseph N. Straus. Foreword by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson.

Publisher: Routledge, 2006

Paper, ISBN: 0-415-97907-2, 312 pages.

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Over the past several decades, music scholars have increasingly sought to examine the myriad ways music interacts with, reflects, and constructs various aspects of identity and difference. Musical academia tends to lag a bit behind other fields in the application of critical and cultural theories and such approaches continue to encounter significant disciplinary resistance from some quarters. Yet when musicologists, ethnomusicologists, and music theorists seriously engage these issues, the results can have profound implications both for the study of music and for the uses of music by scholars from other fields. Neil Lerner and Joseph N. Straus's edited collection of essays *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music* makes just such contributions.

One of the most significant impediments to interdisciplinary musical studies has been the assumption that discussing music requires a prohibitively technical language. Several of the collection's essays—particularly in the third part, “Composing Disability Musically”—do, in fact, seem to assume a certain level of proficiency in the parlance of music theory, but throughout the collection, those authors who engage in close musical analysis take pains to explain the broader implications of both the theoretical concepts they utilize and the specific observations their theoretical lenses enable. Therefore, while music non-specialists may, in isolated passages, find themselves puzzling over certain terminology, these moments of discipline-specific jargon should not prove a significant hindrance. Rather, as all good cultural studies should strive to do, the authors provide gateways through which scholars from a wide range of fields can access the cultural products under scrutiny.

Some of the collection's authors avoid technical analysis of specific works and, instead, engage broader issues of musical performance and reception. Laurie Stras's, “The Organ of the Soul: Voice, Damage, and Affect,” is particularly exemplary of this approach. Her examination of how the valuing of certain vocal sounds under the standard rubric of classical training construes voices which deviate from the norm as “impaired,” reveals the complexity of audiences' relationships with particular kinds of vocal production, while suggesting useful frameworks for understanding such subjective responses. Dave Headlam's, “Learning to Hear Autistically,” presents equally engaging prospects for the productive reconfiguration of the reception of cultural products when we are brave enough not to construe physical or psychological difference as pathology or deviance.

Through a remarkably diverse set of applications of Disability Studies, *Sounding Off* consistently challenges some of the most basic assumptions of musical rhetoric and structure in order to reveal the latent ableism underpinning them, as well as to suggest the enormous value of critically engaging their cultural implications. How does the standard Western musical valuing of teleological structures—perhaps most aptly condensed in that basic building block of musical education, the “harmonic *progression*”—relate to discourses of “curing” and traditional conceptions of life narratives? How does the systematization of composition, performance and reception limit or hinder the potential for differently-bodied musical engagement? Most importantly, how can Disability Studies contribute to the dismantling of ableism in music, and how can music contribute to the dismantling of ableism in culture more broadly? *Sounding Off* is an important step in these processes and, as more interdisciplinary studies of disability and music emerge, it should serve as a useful reference in the development of theoretical vocabularies.