Barry Shank, *The Political Force of Musical Beauty*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 344 pp.

The intricate relationship between popular music and politics has been the subject of much scholarship since the 1960s. Civil rights songs, Riot Grrrl punk music and conscious rap, among many others, have been the focus of a vast body of research, documenting the significance of music in social movements throughout U.S. history and beyond. Rock and pop music has been hailed as a "weapon of cultural revolution" and as a means to social transformation,[1] while more nuanced arguments have acknowledged the music's intrinsic nature as a mass commodity meant to be sold and consumed as part of the culture industry.[2] A negotiation of conflicting needs guides many of the questions that have been raised: How does music exert political influence? How do pop songs shape political thought and represent political ideas? How does music foster political belonging? Or, put another way: Can sound subvert?

In *The Political Force of Musical Beauty*, Barry Shank approaches these questions in a strikingly new and refreshing way. Shank steers clear of the popular yet somewhat simplistic notion that music serves as vehicle for political actors to communicate shared political ideas and forward an agenda. He showcases the agency of music itself, the ways in which it "enacts its own force, creating shared senses of the world" (2), as he suggests in an introductory chapter titled, tongue-in-cheek, "Prelude." The experience of musical listening, Shank purports, forms communities characterized by difference, not unity—and this pleasurable experience has both aesthetic and political implications. Putting aside the intentions of the artists and the identity of the listeners, he highlights how music's political force pertains to its "capacity to combine relations of difference into experiences of beauty" (16). The experience of beauty, according to Shank, is an experience that allows the listener to recognize the possibility of change, a change for a "better future": "a truly aesthetic musical act," he claims, "is one that reveals the political significance of sounds previously heard as nothing but noise" (3).

Shank uses case studies to illustrate how the power of music is located in beauty, and how musical beauty comes to life in the act of listening. The chosen examples—ranging from Moby's sampling of Vera Hall's version of "Trouble So Hard" on his track "Natural Blues" to the civil rights movement's prominent "We Shall Overcome," the sounds of Takemitsu Toro and Yoko Ono, the Velvet Underground's "Heroin," poet-rock star Patti Smith, Alarm Will Sound's concert collage *1969*, and TV on the Radio's musical encounter with Tinariwen, a band of Tuareg musicians, to name just a few—all create "a sonic image of right relations, an audible constellation of mobile forms shifting in time, performing and occasionally transforming one's sense of the world," as Shank explains. The choice of cases, albeit at first seemingly eclectic, works well for Shank's argument—and makes this study a deeply personal one, as Shank admits in a little caveat: "To be honest, every one of the musical examples I analyze transformed my sense of the world" (4). While some readers may wish for a less subjective and emotionally charged sample of case studies and others will search in vain for a discussion of hip hop, Shank's passion for his subject matter is actually one of the many strengths of this book—the author's grasp, his keen sense of music and nuanced understanding of the sensibilities of musical listening make it both accessible and highly entertaining to read.

In order to frame the ensuing explorations of the relationship between musical beauty and political belonging, chapter one ("Listening to the Political") provides the reader with an analytical framework rooted in aesthetic theory. Shank, professor of Comparative Studies at Ohio State University, builds on Jacques Rancière's concept of "the distribution of the sensible" in order to explain the relation between aesthetics and politics (27). Shank links Rancière's concept to philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's observation of musical listening as an "attentive relationship to meaning that reveals the gaps in symbolizing while it revels in the social and embodied sensuousness of its reflexive processes" (20). This kind of engagement with the music, or *sens*, as Nancy calls it, manifests itself in the listeners' search for meaning—a search that demands a reconfiguration of the sensible. The experience of musical beauty may lead to

[1] John Sinclair, *Guitar Army: Street Writings/Prison Writings* (New York: Douglas Book Corporation, 1972), 117,

[2] Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock'n'Roll* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 6.

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a transformation of the sensible, but doesn't necessarily lead to palpable political change. However, according to Shank, it "affects the shape of the common, changing the qualities of feeling and the possible elements that can be included in the debate by shifting the sensibility toward relations that can forge together into a meaningful (if divided) whole" (28). This is the locus of the political agency of music: A redistribution of the sensible recalibrates the listeners' sensibilities and creates "communities of listeners oriented toward an object of musical beauty" (260).

Shank applies his theoretical considerations throughout his book and elegantly interweaves philosophical thought with rich case analyses. An excellent case in point is his discussion of electronica artist Moby's release "Natural Blues" which features African American folk singer Vera Hall's version of "Trouble So Hard." Hall was first recorded singing "Trouble So Hard" by John Lomax in the late 1930s, and then again in the late 1950s by his son Alan Lomax. While some critics blamed Moby of yet another "theft" of her voice in a world still teeming with racially coded power inequalities, Shank offers a different interpretation. His close reading of "Trouble So Hard," a song that contains allusions to racism and the rule of white supremacy, and its recontextualization in Moby's 1999 hit song convincingly asserts that "Natural Blues" unfolds political agency due to the fact that it makes the listeners think about the production and underlying struggles of the track. It calls attention to the continuing role of racial inequality in U.S. culture and sheds light on the necessity "to build political community with the knowledge of that divide, a political community of difference" (37).

Shank's analytical skills are on fine display when he takes on some of the more obviously political songs in a chapter entitled "The Anthem and the Condensation of Context": National hymns like "The Star-Spangled Banner," the civil rights movement's prominent "We Shall Overcome" and pop anthems like Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come" have been the subject of much scholarship, and yet Shank's reading of these songs opens up new perspectives. Shank enlists Lauren Berlant's concept of the *intimate public*, a term Berlant uses to describe "groups formed in and through a sense of shared and ordinary feeling," in order to explain how "anthems" confirm belonging, create a sense of justice and assert the equality of feelings. In a close reading of "A Change Is Gonna Come"—as always, Shank ascribes as much importance to musical arrangements (rhythm, key, instrumentation, arrangement, timbre) as to lyrical content—the author demonstrates the importance of musical and historical context, especially with regard to soul as a secularized version of gospel: In continuation with a certain anthemic tradition this 1964 soul song's potential is located in the "already existing unity of a political community confirmed by its congregational context" which works to transform musical sounds into "musical agents capable of generating new and expansive inclining communities united for a moment by a song" (70). While the song didn't require the listener to subscribe to a tangible political agenda—and intimate publics are always at risk of sentimental dilution—, it left no listener unaffected. Pop anthems, Shank argues, work "through the power that music has to catch our ear, fix us in place, and get us to listen" (71).

Throughout his study, Shank draws on an impressive range of musical examples—his discussion of the Velvet Underground's drone as a critique of commercial imperatives strikes the reader as particularly salient—to thoroughly develop his argument. The musical and historical background he provides for each of his case studies are meticulously researched and designed to elucidate theories, terms, and arguments both vividly and in-depth. The greatest accomplishment of this riveting inquiry into the mechanics of popular music is, however, Shank's discussion of 'musical listening' which he believes to reach far beyond a close attention to the lyrics or even the musical score. His emphasis on the importance of musical beauty in the emergence of political agency contributes substantially both to aesthetic theory and music studies.

The conclusion, or "Coda," serves as an excellent aggregation of Shank's insistence on "beauty as the locus of music's power" (3) that lingers in the mind of the reader. Shank ends his insightful and dense discussion of music and political belonging with Tinariwen, a Tuareg band, and their encounter with indie rock band TV on the Radio. The vastly different musical-political contexts from which these bands originate enable a dialogue between aural imaginaries: Musical beauty creates new relations in an intimate public and renders a redistribution of the sensible possible.

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