

Music as a technology of the self[☆]

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Abstract

The question of music's social effects has a venerable tradition within social theory but has rarely been explored through empirical and ethnographic work. Drawing on 52 depth interviews with women between the ages of 18 and 78 in small towns and urban metropolitan areas in the USA and UK, this study shows how music 'gets into' or provides a medium for forms of social agency. Focus is directed to respondents' mundane music consumption, in particular to musical reflexive practices they employ to constitute and reconstitute themselves as specific types of agents. Respondents use music as a resource for the conduct of emotional 'work', and for heightening or changing energy levels. They also turn to music as a device for on-going identity work and for spinning a biographical thread of self-remembrance. Music provides respondents with a scaffolding for self-constitution. Focus on specific uses of music and individuals' experiences of musical culture illuminates some of the mechanisms through which music provides organizing materials of subjectivity. © 1999 Published by Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

'I think everybody should listen to music. It helps you to be calm, relaxed, to see your life differently.'
– Mireille, contract cleaner, London

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1. Introduction – music as a technology of the self

The self, configured as a unitary, autonomous individual in possession of an essential subjectivity, is one of the linchpins of modern social organization (Weber, 1970, 1985; Habermas, 1984, 1987). More recently, and in line with the discursive turn in social theory (Foucault, 1989a,b) and the deconstruction of biography (Bertaux, 1986; Bruner, 1993; DeNora, 1995a,c; Denzin, 1989; Elbaz, 1988; Giddens, 1991; Harré, 1998; McAdams, 1996), focus has turned to the ‘reflexive project’ of the self, whose care and cultivation rests upon a somewhat fragile conglomerate of social, material and discourse practices and the forms of identification linked to these practices (Bauman, 1982; Bocock, 1995; Featherstone, 1991; Heatherington, 1998; Lash and Urry, 1994; Zolberg, 1996; Zukin, 1988). It is curious, then, that music – the commonsense medium *par excellence* of feeling and all things ‘personal’ – has been little explored in relation to the constitution of self. In this paper I argue that music is a cultural resource that actors may mobilize for their on-going work of self-construction and the emotional, memory and biographical work such a project entails. Focus on intimate musical practices – on the so-called ‘private’ or one-to-one forms of ‘human-music interaction’ offers an ideal vantage point for viewing music ‘in action’, that is, for observing music as it comes to be implicated in the construction of the self as an aesthetic agent.

To these ends, I employ ethnographic interview data to document actors as they draw upon music for the regulation, elaboration and substantiation of themselves as social agents. I try to show music as it is implicated in the self-generation of social agency *as this process occurs ‘in action’*. I argue that the ostensibly ‘private’ matter of individual musical use is part and parcel of the cultural constitution of subjectivity. As such, private music consumption connects with Giddens’ (1991) notion of the self as a reflexive project, one that entails the active production of self-identity over time. Such consumption can be conceived as part of what Lash and Urry (1994: 5ff.) describe as the ‘aesthetic reflexive’ activity of self creation and maintenance. Employing the term ‘aesthetic reflexivity’ in relation to musical practice serves to index the ways in which music consumption may provide a means for self-interpretation, for the articulation of self-image and for the adaptation of various emotional states associated with the self in social life. To speak of this process of self-knowledge and its constitution is to speak of how the expressive and stylistic parameters of self are established, maintained and changed. This process differs significantly from most sociological conceptions of reflexivity in relation to the constitution and care of the self (e.g. Giddens, 1991), where reflexivity is conceived in terms of agents’ self monitoring and their discursive, cognitive skill. Examining these individual experiences/uses of musical culture also helps to develop current perspectives devoted to the reception and appropriation of aesthetic forms (Tota, 1997; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, 1991; Moores, 1990; DeNora, 1986; Hennion, 1993; Radway, 1988; Press, 1994; van Rees, 1987), and to the sociology of emotions and emotional work (Hochschild, 1983).

2. Scope of research

The project, which ran over one year, consisted of five components or mini-studies, the aim of which was to examine music's role in daily life from a variety of angles that could be compared and contrasted. In addition to the interviews described below – the data set drawn upon by this article – the project also produced four ethnographies of music in social settings. These were devoted to music as it featured in karaoke evenings in a local pub, creative music therapy sessions, aerobics classes, and retail clothing outlets. Findings from these ethnographies are reported in adjacent publications (DeNora, forthcoming; Belcher and DeNora, forthcoming; DeNora and Belcher, forthcoming).

The study included 52 depth interviews with women of different age ranges in the USA and UK, in small towns and urban metropolitan areas. The occupational backgrounds of these women were varied – students, unemployed, retired, literary and creative professionals, domestic workers, administrators, cleaners, clerical workers, clinicians, nurses, academics. About 10% could be counted as members of a racial or ethnic minority, and roughly two thirds were involved or had at one time been involved in a long term relationship.

The point of the research was exploratory – to investigate the practices of musical use in daily life, and to examine music as an organizing force in social life. The research focused on women in an attempt to compensate for the general neglect – often commented upon in the literature (e.g. McRobbie, 1991 [1980]) – of women's music practice within popular music, cultural and sub-cultural studies. The exclusive focus on women enabled the project to redress this imbalance and also to achieve a modicum of descriptive depth for one category of music user, namely, women, given restrictions on sample size.

Questions were open-ended. They focused on respondents' music collections (if applicable) and daily routines. For example, 'can you tell me about yesterday – from the moment you woke up to the moment you fell asleep – and about how music featured in your day whether this was music you chose to listen to or that you overheard, for example in a shop?' Prompts were used to jog respondents' memories (e.g. 'Did you listen to any music while you had your bath? Did you use a radio alarm to wake you up?').

The interviews did not aim to produce statistically 'representative' data about, for example, the links between musical taste and social standing; this work has been conducted ably by others (Bryson, 1996; Lamont, 1992; Peterson and Simkus, 1992; DiMaggio and Useem, 1978, 1979; Bourdieu, 1984). However, the resulting data did suggest some patterns that have been illuminated by previous, more extensive surveys, as discussed below, especially in relation to age cohort. These indicative patterns are a topic for future exploration. The interviews were designed to explore music reception in relation to the fabric and texture of respondents' daily lives. The aim was to illuminate this relationship at the level of actual musical practice, to explore how music worked 'in process' rather than elicit bald statements from respondents about musical tastes or about what music 'does for them' in abstract terms (e.g. 'music moves me'). To this end, the interviews focused on the matter of

how the consumption of a cultural product (music) is part of the reflexive and ongoing process of structuring social and social psychological existence. The aim was to arrive instead at a gallery of practices wherein music was mobilized as part of the constitution of real time experience. This strategy entailed an attendant shift from a concern with what music ‘means’ (which is a question for music criticism and music appreciation) to a concern with what it ‘does’ in particular times and places as a dynamic material of social existence. Adjacent to this shift, was a move away from the tendency within socio-musical studies to privilege musicological conceptions of reception in which the notion of attention to ‘works’ predominates. Notions, as devised by Adorno for example, of hearing’s ‘regression’ (1978), or of a hierarchy of modes of musical attention (1976), simply do not come close to capturing the myriad ways in which music comes into play in daily experience, where the range of musical practice far exceeds musicological models of reception. The question of whether a work is heard ‘correctly’ is simply irrelevant for the question of how music may be implicated in the formation of subjectivity and this issue is developed below.

3. Overview of the text

How, then, can we begin to understand music’s powers with regard to the constitution of self and self-identity? And how may music’s powers in relation to the self and to subjectivity be seen in the ‘private’, aesthetically reflexive musical practices of individuals? To address these matters I shall discuss the following topics. First, I consider the high degree of practical musical knowledge as exhibited by the respondents in our study and their ability to reflect upon what they ‘need’, musically, at different times and under different circumstances. From there, I move on to describe music’s role in relation to emotional self-regulation. I describe a number of musical strategies devoted to emotional self-management, from ‘revving up’ to ‘calming down’ to ‘venting’ strong emotions, to producing mental concentration. I then turn to music’s role in relation to self-identity, beginning with respondents’ descriptions of music as a device for producing autobiographical memory and moving on to consider music as providing a template or source in which respondents may ‘find’ or ‘view’ themselves, a model for the composition and validation of self-identity as projected to self and others.

4. ‘Knowing’ what you ‘need’ – self-programming and musical material

‘Music helps me,’ says Lucy, a 51-year-old English woman. It, ‘can inspire you,’ ‘bring understanding’, ‘raise you to another plane’. With her own experiences in mind, Lucy expresses what nearly every interviewee expressed in one form of words or another – music has transformative powers, it ‘does’ things, ‘changes’ things, ‘makes things happen’.

Nearly all of these women were explicit about music’s role as an ordering device at the ‘personal’ level, as a means for creating, enhancing, sustaining and changing

subjective, cognitive, bodily and self-conceptual states. Consider this quote from 25-year-old Latoya, a sales assistant at Manhattan's Tower Records:

Like with my R&B, um, most of the time I listen to it when I'm, you know, trying to relax. I'm gonna sleep, sometimes I'll throw on a few tracks to wake me up, nice 'n slow and then I'll throw on, something else. And then, sometimes, you know, if I'm not really not in that relaxed mood, I'm like, you know, 'I don't wanna listen to that' and I'll throw something fast on, or, something fast is playing and I'm like 'that's too chaotic for me right now, I have to put something slow on. (Latoya)

Here Latoya underlines one of the first things that became clear from the interviews with women about music 'in their lives' – nearly everyone with whom we spoke, levels of musical training notwithstanding, exhibited considerable awareness about the music they 'needed' to hear in different situations and at different times. They were often working – as Latoya's quote makes clear – like disk jockeys to themselves. They drew upon elaborate repertoires of musical programming practice, and a sharp awareness of how to mobilize music to arrive at, enhance and alter aspects of themselves and their self-concepts. This practical knowledge should be viewed as part of the (often tacit) practices in and through which respondents produced themselves as coherent social and socially disciplined beings. The use of music in private life and the study of this use turned out to be one of the most important features of the constitution and regulation of self. For example, Lucy explains why she chose to listen to some of the Schubert *Impromptus* on the morning of the interview as a means of alleviating 'stress':

Lucy: It's very difficult to explain. I mean, I knew I wanted to hear that particular tape, sometimes I wouldn't choose that because well, it would remind me of my dad *too* much, um. I've know that that music all my life has helped me, has soothed me, and it's lovely. I never get tired of it so, I *knew* I wouldn't be disappointed in it and – even so, it's difficult to say why I chose it. Sometimes – I didn't have to think about it this morning. I mean I wanted to play that but other times I know that I want some music but I can't, I look at all the tapes and I think, 'no, that's not quite it, I don't want to hear that'.
Q. And you go through thinking, 'what seems right just now'?

Lucy: Yeah. And sometimes you just can't find the right thing, or you just want a particular bit and it's too difficult to find it in the tape, I mean a cd is a bit easier because you can just flick around.

Here, in another example, is Deborah, a 25-year-old executive assistant to a New York literary agent:

Deborah: First thing in the morning, when I get up I have the clock radio set to music, it's a lot softer than having the alarm go off in the morning.

Q. What kind of music is likely to come on when your clock radio comes on?

Deborah. Em, a lot of things, depending on what kind of mood I'm in. I usually set it the night before or something if I know I'm going to have a rough day the next morning, that kind of thing.

The vocabulary of using music to achieve what you 'need' is of course a common discourse of the self, part of the literary technology through which subjectivity is constituted as an object of self-knowledge. But the specific discourses that respondents invoke as descriptors of 'what they need' are not free-floating; they are typically linked to practical exigencies of their appropriation and to interactions with

others as the discussion below of ‘emotional work’ makes clear. For example, Angela, an 18-year-old High School Student in New York City says, ‘if I need to really settle down and just like to relax or something I’ll put on slow music’.

Respondents were also highly knowledgeable of musical materials that, in their pursuit of self-regulation, they tended to avoid. For example, in the excerpt below, Lucy shows that she has given serious thought not only to the matter of what she ‘needs’ musically, but also to what she needs to steer clear of (rather as one might avoid certain foodstuffs). When she is in a ‘sad’ frame of mind, for example, minor keys are ‘more’ sorrowful than they would be otherwise; their effects are heightened:

Lucy: I do find that I have to be careful with music in a minor key, sometimes. I remember once when my mother died, and I must of put some music on and it made me cry – not that it was associated with her, but it was just -- in a minor key and my husband said, ‘Gosh, you should avoid the key for a little while’, and he was quite right because anything sad just dropped the mood a little bit lower. I wasn’t able to cope with any more sadness at that time.

Q. At that time did you make any deliberate attempt then to turn to music that would ‘lift’ you, or make you not sad? Did you change listening habits?

Lucy: I can’t rem- this was years and years ago when she died, I can’t remember that particular incident, but I think I’ve learned from that to be careful, and not to, if I am feeling really sad, not to wallow in it with music, it can make you, really, really, luxuriate in sadness. I think what’s coming out of this, [name of interviewer], is that music is so important to me that I have to be careful what it does to me, because it can do an awful lot.

5. Aesthetic reflexivity

Recent social theory concerned with ‘modernity’ has identified the ability to be reflexive about and mobilize cultural forms as a hallmark of being in so-called ‘high’ modern societies (Lash and Urry, 1994; Giddens, 1990, 1991). Following Simmel, these writers conceive of the rise of aestheticization as a strategy for the preservation of identity and social boundaries under anonymous and often crowded conditions of existence. The modern ‘self’ is portrayed, within this perspective, as subject to heightened demands for flexibility and variation. Actors move, often at rapid pace, through the numerous and often crowded conditions that characterize daily existence. These writers portray the ‘self’ – who is depicted as emerging as a concept during the renaissance but as incipient in the Christian theological conception of the soul and in ‘depth’ of character (cf. Auerbach, 1953: 12) – as subject to heightened demands under advanced modernity. The self is called upon to be increasingly agile, to be able to manage perspectival and circumstantial incongruity, for example, as happens when individuals move rapidly through numerous and often discrete worlds where actors and values may not mesh. As incongruity escalates, and as actors experience alternation as they move between worlds, the machinery or ‘work’ required of social actors as they configure themselves as agents is made increasingly visible, as an object upon which actors can reflect. Heightened aesthetic reflexivity is thus conceived within current social theory as a function of the (often contradictory) demands made upon the self under advanced modernity. It is further fuelled by the

rise of a post-production or 'service' economy in the West, where 'life style' industries have created and continue to expand markets at nearly all socio-economic levels (Bocock, 1995; Lash and Urry, 1994; Belcher, 1997). Individual actors thus not only engage in self-monitoring and self-regulation; they also seek out such 'goods' as 'space', 'relaxation', 'pleasure' and so forth.

One need not accept the historicism of such arguments to accept their thesis concerning reflexivity and contradiction. Under any historical conditions where an individual feels a tension between what s/he 'must' do and what she 'feels like' doing, or between how s/he 'feels' and how s/he 'wishes' to feel, the problem of self-regulation arises and with it, the matter of how individuals negotiate between the poles of necessity and preference, between how they think they 'ought' to feel and how they 'do' feel. It is often unclear whether engaging in the regulatory work aimed at reconciling these tensions (through forms of cultural and aesthetic appropriation) is self-emancipatory or, as Adorno and other critical theorists have suggested (Goldfarb, 1991; see also Giddens, 1991), whether it is party to the 'prison house' of advanced capitalism with its reconfiguration of the subject as a 'good's desiring' entity. Such 'high level' questions are perhaps best answered through specific reference to real actors. This paper aims to contextualize issues such as these by considering some of the processes in and through which self-regulation transpires. Indeed, a focus on self-regulatory strategies can only enhance current concern within organizational sociology on the matter of how individuals manage to equip themselves as 'appropriate' organizational agents, which is simultaneously a matter of how they configure themselves as aesthetic agents possessed of an 'incipient readiness' for action modalities within specific social scenes and schedules (Witkin and DeNora, 1997). Hochschild's (1983) classic discussion of 'emotional work' speaks to this issue. Within organizationally sponsored circumstances, individuals may feel it incumbent upon themselves to configure themselves as certain kinds of agents, characterized and internalizing certain modalities of feeling. The flight attendants Hochschild describes are called upon (in gender biased ways) to engage not only in productive, contractually specified, activities, but also to engage in the non-contractually specified work of adopting and projecting modalities of emotional agency. Just as they must engage in 'body work' (Tyler and Abbot, 1998), so too they must seem 'genuinely' friendly, caring, and so on, to produce themselves as human emblems of an airline's 'friendly skies.'

6. Musically re-configuring agency – self-regulation, self-modulation

One of the first things music does is to help actors to shift mood or energy level, as perceived situations dictate, or as part of the 'care of self'. For Latoya, Lucy, and Deborah, discussed above, music is an accomplice in attaining, enhancing and maintaining desired states of feeling and bodily energy (e.g. relaxation); it is a vehicle they use to move out of dispreferred states (e.g. stress, fatigue). It is a resource for modulating and structuring the parameters of aesthetic agency – feeling, motivation, desire, comportment, action style, energy. By this, what respondents often mean is

that its specific properties – its rhythms, gestures, harmonies, styles, and so on – are used as referents or representations of ‘where’ they wish to go, emotionally, physically, and so on. Respondents make, in other words, articulations between musical works, styles and materials on the one hand and modes of agency on the other such that music is used to cast an aspired state. It is mobilised as a prospective representation of that state. When respondents are choosing music as part of this care of self, they are engaging in self-conscious articulation work, thinking ahead about the music that will ‘work’ for the purpose at hand. These articulations are made on the basis of what respondents perceive the music to afford, what, in Lucy’s words above, will be ‘the right thing’, what will ‘help’. This perception is in turn shaped by a range of matters: previous associations respondents have made between particular musical materials and other things (biographical, situational), more generalized connotations respondents associate with the music (e.g. its style), perceived parallels between musical materials/processes and social or physical materials/processes (e.g., slow and quiet: relaxed), and so on.

For example here is Becky, describing how she uses music to motivate her on evenings when she is going out. The passage comes after a discussion of her ‘ambient sounds’ cd’s that she uses for working, relaxing, meditating:

Q. One of the questions I was going to ask [was] ... are there sounds apart from music that you particularly like ...?

Becky: ... I love to listen to the sea. And I’ve also got dolphins, I like to listen to the sound of the dolphins. I find that quite peaceful. I find that very soothing, all of them are very, very relaxing. It makes me smile and when I find myself smiling I think what are you smiling for (laugh). They have that affect.

Q. And that would be the dolphin sounds or the wave sounds or whatever, that would be something you would use if you needed to relax? How about like at bathtime, do you listen to music during a bathtime?

Becky: I do yes, I tend to listen to these tapes unless I’m getting ready to go out [when] I tend to put something very loud, very heavy on (laugh). Which again I use it to try and motivate me to get in the mood for where I’m going.

Q. If you were going out what kind of thing –

Becky: em

Q. Would it be the radio?

Becky: No, it would probably be a cd. I don’t know, I think it would depend on where I was going and how I was feeling at the time. If I was feeling particularly, like I wasn’t really looking forward to where I was going then I would have to put something really lively on to try and get me in the mood.

Q. Where might you be going that you weren’t really looking forward to?

Becky: Family gatherings (laughter). Or some sort of meeting to do with the scouts, I tend to really not look forward to that.

Faced with the prospect of having to get into what she perceives as the appropriate energy and emotional mode for ‘going out’, Becky turns to different kinds of music to reconfigure herself, to ‘get in the mood’. Here, music is used as a catalyst that shifts actors out of their reluctance to adopt what they perceive as ‘necessary’ modes of agency, and into the modes of agency ‘demanded’ by particular circumstances. This common musical strategy was described by many respondents in relation to getting ready to go to work or getting moving with household chores. For example, ‘I typically play a country music station almost every morning coming in to work cause it is – I just enjoy the music, it’s sort of sad, twangy, ballady music

and there's that very lively stuff, but it's lively music at the first part of the day so that's what I almost always do' says Elaine, a 55-year-old psychotherapist in up-state New York. 'First thing in the morning I like quite sort of music that will get you up and get you going, so something that's quite upbeat and cheerful', says Nancy, 'and late at night as well if I'm going out something similar'. '[Music] keeps you going – almost like nullifying in a way, because you don't think about what you're doing, you just listen to the music and get on with the routine of housework or whatever' says Lesley.

In other cases, music is used by respondents to ease them on to courses of action and modes of aesthetic agency that they actually desire. 52-year-old Vanessa, for example, uses precisely this term in describing how she uses music on summer afternoons as she prepares to host a barbecue.

Q. Have you ever tried to set a mood in any way, where you may have put things on in the background to get things livened up, or have some effect in other words?

Vanessa: Yea, in particular barbecues. A barbecue should be lively shouldn't it?

Q. Yes.

Vanessa: Everyone talking – that's why I tend to put on Latin which is really buzzy.

Q. Yes? This is during the day?

Vanessa: Yeah, in the afternoon – whatever. And if I wanted to cheer myself up I would play that type of music as well.

Q. OK – and what is it about that, that would cheer you up? I know that sounds like a stupid question

...

Vanessa: I don't know – I just like Latin – it makes you feel good I guess.

Q. Something to do with the music itself? Like the rhythm?

Vanessa: Yeah, it must be the rhythm.

Q. Or is it something to do with the association?

Vanessa: It's just a get-up-and-go type sound really. It sort of – instantly you hear it – you speed up a bit.

Q. Would you say then, that it has quite an effect on your energy?

Vanessa: I think so, music does definitely.

Q. When you put the Latin music on at the barbecue, do you put it on before anyone arrives?

Vanessa: Yeah, I tend to whilst I'm preparing the food.

Q. OK – why do you put it on at that stage?

Vanessa: Before?

Q. Yes.

Vanessa: Because it gets *me* going.

Q. When you say 'me' what do you mean?

Vanessa: Well, it gets you in the mood. When you're cooking and preparing it gets you in the mood.

Using music to 'get in the mood', 'get going' and so forth were referred to by nearly all respondents, particularly in reference to going out, or getting ready for a social event. 'I probably put a 70's Disco album on and prance around and stuff (laughter). Or I'd probably put – this is another sad thing I do – Gary Barlow' [the singer in *Take That* on the record player], says 19-year-old Imogen.

Conversely, music can be used to 'get out of moods' – 'bad' moods in particular, but also to 'de-stress' or wind down. Beatrice, a soft-spoken 20-year-old American university student who lives at home and likes to play Bach preludes and fugues on her piano, puts it this way: 'When ever anyone gets angry we all tend to go to our

rooms and turn on the music really loud'. She describes the process as 'venting' (i.e., letting off steam) with music:

Beatrice: I just go to my room, slam the door, play my music and just sort of feel mad for a couple more minutes ... When I turn the music up real loud it fills my room, it's like I can't hear anything outside my room and just me really mad.

As Beatrice describes this process, 'the act is parallel to – perhaps – punching a pillow or something. Because it really makes me feel that I'm taking the anger away. I don't know how that happens but it really works'. The music provides a simulacrum for a behavioral impulse – Beatrice makes an articulation between an alternate course of action ('punching a pillow'), her feelings ('angry') and a set of musical materials. Lesley, a 39-year-old mature student at an English university and mother of three teenage boys makes this point explicitly. 'Sometimes, like with punk music or any sort of so-called anti-establishment music you can identify with it but it can also diffuse your mood because you sort of listen it out if you see what I mean – rather than just going and hitting someone or doing something like kicking the door.' Music gives respondents a medium in which to 'work through moods'. It provides a way of transferring their means of expression from the 'real', physical realm ('hitting someone or doing something like kicking the door', 'punching a pillow') to the 'imagined', the virtual. Music thus provides a virtual reality within which respondents are able to express themselves in a (symbolically) violent manner, for example by choosing 'aggressive' or 'anti-establishment' music, or by playing music at full volume. This virtual realm is a haven for angry individuals; within this haven, they adopt the position of being in control of the symbolic and physical environment. For a few moments, the environment consists, virtually, of only music ('it fills my room ...'), and the determination of this environment, within a bedroom in a house, can be controlled with the flick of a switch. One can thus recapture virtually, transposed to the medium of music, what one has had to concede interactionally; self-determination is re-established on a level transposed. It is no surprise then that headphones are strictly *not* employed for this process; for the point is to perpetrate a kind of aesthetic violence, to 'scream', 'punch' or 'kick' musically, and thus to have power over one's (aesthetic) environment. It is also important to *feel* (and respond to) the *physical* character of this reality throughout one's body.

Typically, for the purpose of 'venting' as Beatrice calls it, respondents do not use music they associate with their regular routines, habits and 'normal' courses of conduct and musical tastes. Unlike cases where respondents report on how they use music to 'get them going' prior to going out or to hosting a party, here music is used to express and then diffuse a particular interlude of intense, negative feeling. Karen, for example, a 26-year-old postgraduate student in New York City, describes how she would never listen to her preferred music – Broadway musicals – 'because if I don't want my mood to change, if I'm just grumpy, I don't want to hear people singing about being happy ... I just feel 'irritated' more when I listen to it when I am in the wrong mood. Most of the time I'll know it and I won't even think about putting it on', Karen goes on to describe how, if she is in a 'bad mood' she puts on

rock music (which otherwise she does not listen to). And Monica describes how, living with her boyfriend's parents over the university summer vacation she used Radiohead's 'We Hope You Choke!' as a way of simultaneously diffusing her anger against her 'in-laws' and also as a kind of virtual message to them, played at full volume! 'Anger' or 'rage' are, for these women exceptional emotions; and the musical materials ('rock', 'anti-establishmentarian') and music consumption practices ('blasting') associated with these exceptional states are accordingly located on the margins of respondents' personal musical maps. Unlike the far more common practices associated with modulating and regulating mood and energy levels, here music's role as a virtual medium of self-expression, of letting off steam ('venting') is key. But it would be wrong to fall into an expressivist discourse of accounting for this practice. Music is not simply used to 'express' some 'internal' feeling state. Indeed, that music is part of the reflexive constitution of that state; it is a resource for the identification work of 'knowing how one feels' – a building material of 'subjectivity'. This is to say that a candidate simulacrum of feeling is also a template for fleshing out feeling, a material against which the 'aspects' of 'how I feel' may be elaborated and made into an object of knowledge. One may say to one's self, 'this music is how I feel' and one may grow tense and relax as the music itself does. 24-year-old Ellen, for example, describes how she uses music to induce and heighten a sad feeling state, in a way that is akin to 'looking at yourself in a mirror being sad' – so as to recursively work herself up into a feeling state that reaches a plateau and then subsides. Henrietta, a 70-year-old former nurse describes a similar process in relation to grieving:

The Verdi requiem is one of my favorites. *That* is associated with losing a baby. Um, and I'd got to know it through my husband and it was really quite a way of grieving, um, I'd shut myself away in a room [she begins to cry] ... It's cathartic I think.

When the music gathers itself into a climax and subsides, one may 'go with it', as Willis' 'bikeboys' aptly put it ('you go with the beat, don't you?' (Willis, 1978: 72), to the extent one identifies one's feeling state with that musical structure. Over time, assuming one uses the same musical materials for these events, one may develop patterns or even styles to feeling states. Thus, to play music as a virtual means of expressing/constructing emotion is also to define the temporal and qualitative structure of that emotion, to play it out in real time and then move on. In this sense music is both an instigator and a container of feeling – anger, sorrow, and so forth. The natural history of the practices and processes in and through which feeling states are identified and 'expressed' (i.e., enacted to self or other over time) is a key topic for the sociology and social psychology of subjectivity. It concerns the question of how aesthetic agency is configured in real time, as passion is choreographed and entrained. I shall take up this question in relation to 'reliving' past events below, where I discuss the socio-cultural ecology of music in public places and in that most 'private' of aesthetic spaces – the intimate interaction. What, though, of music's role in establishing the 'passion-less' state of focused mental concentration?

7. Getting into focus – music and mental concentration

'If there's complete silence then my mind wanders and I just don't concentrate' (Monica). '[Music] keeps my mind working' (Yen). 'I always have music on in my study' (Diana).

One of the most basic things music does is to block out other sounds. This was crucial in noisy urban spaces such as Manhattan ('I put my walkman on sometimes just to drown out sound'). Music also serves as an alternative stimulus for some women when they 'look up' from their work ('it's nice to have a background for something and it's nice to just sort of stop every so often and it refocuses you ... you know how when you look at your computer screen a lot they tell you to stop every half hour and look away, well music does that for me, it sort of reminds me there is something there pleasant I'm doing (laugh)').

But music for some respondents was intrinsic to producing environments that afford concentration, that help them to produce the kind of focus they needed to carry out mental work such as balancing a check book, writing, or studying. And there were certain musical materials that they hailed as conducive to producing focus. For example, Karen observes that music:

gives us both a distraction and a focus better. I find I can focus better when there's music on ... I think that's why, it gives you something else that's going on in your head while you're doing whatever you're doing ... um, if I'm doing like heavy contracts work or something that I have to focus on it would probably be classical. Sometimes it is Broadway music, but it's usually not pop or rock when I'm using it to try to concentrate or something. It's usually classical or stage music.

And Diana says:

[W]hen I was studying I would on the whole listen to something which I didn't have to think about so I would be listening to Schubert's ... or Beethoven's ... trio or um – a lot of Bach choral things. What else have I got up there? Quite a lot of Schubert, Sibelius, um, Mozart piano concertos, Mozart Quartets, quintets, that sort of thing.

Q. You mentioned things with words, are there any other styles of music that you wouldn't listen to when you were working?

Diana: I could listen to jazz um – but when I'm studying if it's something that, if you like, pulls at your heartstrings, or conjures up memories then I won't listen to it when I am studying.

'Classical' music or music without words was most frequently cited as aiding concentration. This was not related to the music's 'intrinsic' qualities per se. Rather, music's powers to promote concentration were derived from its relational position in respondents' map of tastes and practices of music consumption. For the respondents who hailed 'classical music' as a 'focuser' this was usually because such music was least likely to be associated with aspects of their lives outside of the realm of work or study, i.e., music not strongly associated with specific aspects of their social or emotional lives or memories. (Indeed, they often did not know the actual composers or works they used for this purpose but rather made use of compilation cd's, such as baroque highlights, and so forth.) Just as some respondents used music that lay on the margins of their normal music listening material to hold and diffuse anger, so

too, music for holding and concentrating focus was music on the margins of their musical-practical maps.

In addition, they were not the sorts of pieces that made them want to sing along. For example, here is Monica describing the sorts of cd's she had to turn off in order to get back to work:

I listened to Mick Drake actually, then I put on Madonna ... the Immaculate Collection, which is one of my favorites, then I've stopped working you see because it's really – I just sung along to all the songs! So I completely lost really what I was doing. That's what I mean, when there's a really good song I like to sing along to it.

Third, music for promoting concentration was music without overtly foregrounded lyrics – at least not in a language they could understand. Fourth, the music was used by respondents repeatedly for the purpose of gaining focus ('I'm usually listening to something that's very familiar to me. I wouldn't put something new on if I am trying to work and have music I would know the music already so I really don't have reactions to it'), and so it was music that had come to be associated with the production of concentration and circumstances in which mental activity and focus were predominant. In short, music was used here to reproduce an aesthetic environment of 'working' and to circumscribe within that environment 'where the mind can go'. One literally 'stays tuned', through such practices, to a mode of concentrated focus, to the mental task at hand. For example, at the end of the interview with Karen (quoted above) I asked her to return to the issue of music and focus:

Karen: ... Sometimes it holds my focus if I'm bored or something.

Q. It's interesting, you have brought up this issue quite a few times of music and focus. It sounds like you do use music to focus.

Karen: Yes I do.

Q. And now I'm going to ask you something, I don't know if you will be able to help but try. How do you think it helps you to focus?

Karen: Um.

Q. Whether you could describe it in terms of how you feel.

Karen: OK. I just – this is kind of why I use it for work, I'll try to describe it that way, um – I stop thinking about random thoughts [they] just stop going through my head when I have music on, I won't think of what I'm doing or I'll be listening to the music, I won't just be thinking, 'Oh I have to do this, this, this, this, this. It kind of clears my head of all the random thoughts that may pop in and distract me otherwise. And that's how I've used it to focus.

Q. Can I ask you about random thoughts. Is there something about the rest of the environment that's maybe more conducive to bringing random thoughts to you?

Karen: ... I just think I get distracted easily (laugh) and music helps me not to get distracted easily so I'll focus on that and I will focus on what I am, the other thing I'm doing and not about the distraction.

As with the example of music for 'venting', here too, music is used to seal off an environment, and to regularize that environment by predetermining the types of sonic stimuli it will contain. Music is thus a device with which to configure a space such that it affords some activities – concentration – more than others. And in these examples, music affords concentration because it structures the sonic environment, because it dispels random or idiosyncratic stimuli, aesthetic or otherwise. It places in

the foreground sounds that respondents associate with mental work, sounds that are familiar and that recede to the background. With the addition of music, an environment comes to be configured for mental work.

To be sure, not all respondents used music to establish focus. Indeed, to most of the respondents over 70 and to those who were professionally trained musicians (though not necessarily career musicians), the idea of music as ‘background’ to nearly anything was antithetical. Music is something one either makes or listens to intently. For example, 75-year-old Eleanor, a church organist and highly active amateur musician, describes how she would *never* attempt to listen to music if she were doing paperwork, studying chess, or otherwise needing to concentrate:

Eleanor: No. Because the music I have is not background music, the music that I love is something that is wonderful to me, you know, and when I listen to music I listen to the music and well, I might sometimes put it on in breakfast time but then I can’t really concentrate. I use the time during breakfast time doing two crossword puzzles, two cryptograms. It gets my brain going (laugh).

8. ‘Music’s powers to obey’ – relevant units of affect

In all of the above examples, music is an active ingredient in the organization of self, the shifting of mood, energy level, conduct style, mode of attention and engagement with the world. In none of these examples, however, does music simply *act upon* individuals, like a stimulus. Rather, music’s ‘effects’ come from the ways in which individuals orient to it, how they interpret it and how they place it within their personal musical maps, within the semiotic web of music and its extra-musical associations. Moreover – and this would be a grave disappointment for Adorno (cf. Adorno, 1978) – the concept of the musical ‘work’ – the total work as a, or indeed, *the* meaningful unit is mostly irrelevant. Music takes its meaning from many things apart from its intertextual relationship with other musical works (and with the history of those works). While music-stylistic and historical matters may be relevant to the configuration of music’s meaning and significance in some cases (especially with regard to music’s conventional signifying materials such as genre, instrumentation, style, gesture), equally important to the matter of music’s social ‘effects’ is the question of how musical materials relate to extra-musical matters such as occasions and circumstances of use, personal associations, and so forth where the relevant semiotic unit is more likely to be a fragment or a phrase or some specific aspect of the music such as its orchestration or tempo. The use of music as an organizing device in relation to subjectivity and self is above all a pragmatic affair and, although this practice may possess its own logic, it differs considerably from the practice of ‘music appreciation’ traditionally conceived. Respondents, particularly those without formal musical training, engage in various bricolage activities with regard to music, mobilizing, picking and choosing in magpie fashion musical ‘bits’ or, as Negus (1996: 94–96) has aptly termed them, ‘semiotic particles’ that in turn provide cues for and parameters within which a respondent’s modes of aesthetic agency come to be configured and transformed. This practice can be seen clearly in relation to music’s role as a resource for identity construction.

9. Music and self-identity

So far I have tried to illuminate music as an active ingredient in the care of the self. Music is a device or resource to which people turn in order to regulate themselves as aesthetic agents, as feeling, thinking and acting beings in their day-to-day lives. Achieving this regulation requires a high degree of reflexivity; the perceived ‘need’ for regulation described by our respondents emerges with reference to the exigencies and situational ‘demands’ made upon them in and through their interactions with others. I now want to turn to an equally important and related matter – music’s active role as a building material of self-identity.

In light of recent social theory, the concepts of self-identity, ‘personality’ and ‘biography’ have been undergone major redevelopment. No longer conceptualized as a fixed or unitary entity – as something that is an expression of inner ‘essence’ – identity has been recast conceptually as a product of social ‘work’ (Garfinkel, 1967; Giddens, 1991; DeNora, 1995a). Resituated, identity and its historical counterpart, biography, is conceptualized as an abiding trope of modern Western culture, realized in and through practices – textual and social (Atkinson, 1990; Berteaux, 1986; DeNora, 1995b; Denzin, 1989; Stanley and Morgan, 1993). Looked at from this perspective, individuals can be observed as they engage in a range of mostly tacit identity ‘work’ to construct, reinforce and repair the ‘thread’ of self-identity. This work is what makes that thread appear continuous throughout the varied moments of day-to-day living whenever one formulates accounts of self to self and others. A great deal of identity work is produced as presentation of self to other(s) – which includes a micro-politics – through the enactment of a plethora of mini ‘docu-dramas’ over the course of a day (cf. Garfinkel, 1967). But the ‘projection’ of biography is by no means the only basis for the construction of self-identity. Equally significant is a form of ‘introjection’, a presentation of self *to* self, the ability to mobilize and hold on to a coherent image of ‘who one knows one is’. And this involves the social and cultural activity of remembering, the composting of past experiences, for the cultivation of self-accountable imageries of self. Here music again comes to the fore, as part of the retinue of devices for memory retrieval (which is, of course, simultaneously memory construction). Music can be used as a device for the reflexive process of remembering/constructing who one is, a technology for spinning the apparently ‘continuous’ tale of who one ‘is’. To the extent that music is used in this way it is not only, in Radley’s sense, a device of artefactual memory (Radley, 1990; Urry, 1996), it is a device for the generation of future identity and action structures.

10. ‘The song is you’ – musical memories of self/others

One of the first things respondents used music for was to remember key people in their lives, for example loved family members who had died. ‘There’s a piece of music that my grandad used to like very much’, Monica says, ‘and sometimes I’ll be feeling a bit reminiscent about him because we were very close and I’d listen to that to remember him, but it wouldn’t make me sad, it doesn’t make me happy either, it’s

just sort of, “I’ve just remembered you today”, sort of thing, you know’. Similarly, Lucy describes how, shortly after her father had died:

I was coming home from choir practice one evening, and I had the car radio on, switched it on as soon as I got going, and it was playing the [Brahms] Double Concerto and I just had to stop, and some friends were coming behind, you know, and I was just in floods of tears and they said, ‘why don’t you turn it off’ and I said, ‘I can’t’ and that, it was ages before I could listen to that or anything like it without thinking of him, it’s only in the last year or so, because I know now that it meant so much to him and it means so much to me and I realize now how much like him I am. That’s not to say my mother didn’t have an important role in music as well ...

The most frequent type of relationship respondents associated with music was romantic or intimate. Music helped them to recall lovers or former partners and with these memories, emotionally heightened phases or moments in their lives. Diana, for example, described her listening habits and her tendency to listen to biographically key music ‘late evening ... I’m on my own with peace and quiet in my study and I’m often up ‘til 2 in the morning. I regard this time as my own space’:

Diana: ... I had an affair with a Londoner and we used to go out in the evenings two, about twice a week, I don’t know how I managed it, oh I know, because my husband was [working at home] and I would just say I was going out and we used to go to a [London] pub ... and [there singers] used to sing to – em, pop music of that era and A Whiter Shade of Pale was our tune and I just loved it and I suppose that affair went on for about two years, two and a half years.

Q. Can you tell me about how it came to be your tune, you heard it in that bar did you?

Diana: Yes and of course it was on the radio all the time. Yes, we just sort of were absorbed in each other, or we’d hold hands or look at each other intently, something like that.

For many of the respondents, such as Diana, music was linked to a kind of ‘reliving’ of an event or crucial time, often to a relationship. Even within the confines of the small, exploratory sample of 52, certain works appeared more than once:

Lucy: There’s the whole pop music of the sixties and all those hits which can instantly bring back memories ... ‘A Whiter Shade of Pale ... I can say it’s ___ *Haupt Bahnhof*, in August 1967, you know! ... [It] was the hit in summer ’67, and I spent a semester in Germany as a student, and uh, being there in the station, I was just leaving there to go to France, in fact, to meet up with [her future husband] ... and we spent the summer, well, a couple of weeks in France and that was the big record then, and, you know, I suppose that was the start of our uh, just before we got engaged or whatever, you know, but it was just, just culminated the sixties I think, there were a whole lot of songs like that ...

Q. Do you ever listen to that song now?

Lucy: Well I just heard it the other day. I was in a shop, buying something, and there was a woman about the same age as me [52] and I said, ‘that takes you back, doesn’t it?’ and she said, ‘Yeah’ [laughter] and in fact, it was a cd, hits of the sixties that they were playing in that shop.

Q. How did you feel, you said, ‘it takes you back’?

Lucy: I just felt happy, you know, reminded me of, you know.

As Deborah puts it, ‘I have relationship songs, everyone has their relationship songs, and then years later when I talk to somebody I go, “oh my god, I totally related that with us, with you”’. Maria, for example, describes an outdoor concert

she heard on holiday. ‘Now every time I hear a certain kind of new age music, I think of the sky that night and the moon, it was a hot summer, the tall trees, and standing there, arm next to arm with David, feeling electric, like part of a chain of being with him and our environment’. For Andrea, Rod Stewart’s ‘The first cut is the deepest’ and ‘Sailing’ both, ‘have sad memories for me but I like listening to them. I suppose one likes to cry sometimes’. The songs are associated with a broken relationship and ‘the happiness that went with it as well’. Here, Andrea alludes to how, despite being a reminder of a happy time that has come to an end, music simultaneously helps to recapture/construct a sense of the capacity within which one acted (one’s aesthetic agency) and so it helps replay or tell to self a set of heightened life experiences. Through this vicarious review of past experience, this stock-taking of ‘who one is’ or ‘where, interpersonally, one has been’, one registers oneself to oneself as an object of self-knowledge, in the aesthetic construction that is memory.

For some respondents, such as Lucy above, music’s power to evoke the emotional content of relationships is too painful; one does not ‘like to cry’. Henrietta, for example, burst into tears and asked for the tape to be stopped during the interview simply after mentioning the song she and her ex-husband shared when they were first courting (‘Memories Were Made of This’). And here, 77-year-old Bertie, who had recently moved, after her husband died, to an American ‘life care centre’ in up-state New York, tries to explain why she can’t recall in any detail the contents of her record collection (which is stored just next to where we were sitting in her living room but which she avoids consulting, despite some gentle hints):

Bertie: ... I haven’t played my records now half as much as I used to.

Q. Yes, because you mentioned you listen to the radio.

Bertie: Yes. [pause] And I think that has something to do with my husband dying.

Q. Yes.

Bertie: [pause] All those records were so shaded with him and with our listening. I think that’s why I don’t listen as much as I used to.

For Lucy, Maria, Martha and Bertie, music ‘brings back’ waves of emotion, the specificity of a time, an event, a relationship. For other people, music may evoke a more general era. As Judith puts it, ‘music does do it – brings back a certain time in your life, I don’t think it makes me remember about specific things though, whereas photography does, it makes you remember specific things’. Psychologists refer to this process as priming, where, ‘a network of associations that are linked by shared mood connections is activated by music’ (Crozier, 1997: 79). As Deborah, thinking back to her student days and a pleasant semester abroad at Oxford says:

Even if there’s things – I wouldn’t buy the record because I liked the music, I’d buy the record because of its memories, things like Take That remind me of England (laugh). Apart from the fact that I bought one album and spent far too much money on imports because of it reminds me of people I knew in England. Turning on Radio One in the morning, that kind of thing when I was there (Deborah).

For Maria, Diana and Deborah, music reminds them of who they ‘were’ at a certain time – a moment, a season, an era – and helps them to recapture the aesthetic agency they possessed (or which possessed them) at the time. ‘Re-living’ experi-

ence through music is also (re)constituting past experience, it is making manifest within memory what may have been latent or even absent the first-time-through (Urry, 1996) and music provides a device of prosthetic biography (Lury, 1998). Indeed, the *telling* about the past in this way, and of music's ability to invoke past feelings and ways of being, is itself part of this reconstitution. The telling is of course part of the presentation of self to self and other(s). Such reliving, insofar as it is experienced as an identification with/of 'the past,' is part of the work of producing one's self as a coherent being over time, part of producing a retrospection that is in turn a resource for projection into the future, a cueing in to how to proceed. In this sense, the past, musically conjured, is a resource for the reflexive movement from present to future, the moment-to-moment production of agency in real time. It serves also as putting actors in touch with capacities, reminding them of their accomplished identities which in turn fuels the on-going projection of identity from past into future. Musically fostered memories thus produce past trajectories that contain momentum.

At the most general and most basic level, music is a medium that can be and often is simply paired or associated with aspects of past experience. It was part of the past and so becomes an emblem of a larger interactional, emotional complex. A good deal of music's affective powers arise from its co-presence with other things – people, events, scenes, and so on. In some cases, music's semiotic power, here its emblematic capacity, comes from its conditional presence; it was simply 'there at the time'. In such cases, music's specific meanings and its link to circumstances simply emerges from its association with the context in which it is heard. In such cases, the link, or articulation, that is made – and which is so often biographically indelible – is initially arbitrary but is rendered symbolic (and hence evocational) from its relation in the wider retinue of the experience, the moment in question.

To stop at this point, however, is to fail to appreciate the extent of music's semiotic powers in relation to the construction of memory and, indeed, to the experience that comes to be lodged and is 'retrievable' within autobiographical memory. These two issues are related. They need to be developed because they lead into the matter of how, as it is sometimes put, 'the music itself' is active in the constitution of the shape of subjectivity and self-identity.

11. Musical memories and the choreography of feeling

Music moves through time, it is a temporal medium. This is the first reason why it is a powerful *aide memoire*. Like an article of clothing or an aroma, music is part of the material and aesthetic environment in which it 'once before' was playing, in which the past, now an artefact of memory and its constitution, was once a present. Unlike material objects, however, music that is associated with past experience was, within that experience, heard over time. And when it is music that is associated with a particular moment and a particular space – as it was for Diana in a pub, Maria under the trees at an outdoor concert, and Lucy in the German train station – music heard again provides a device for unfolding, for replaying, the temporal structure of

that moment, its dynamism as emerging experience. This is why, for so many people, the past ‘comes alive’ to its soundtrack.

But there is yet more to it. For the women described above, the soundtrack of their action was not mere accompaniment. It did not merely follow their experience, was not merely overlaid upon it. True, the particular music may have been arbitrarily paired with the experiential moment – indeed, Diana, Maria and Lucy all describe how the music that ‘brings it all back’ was music that ‘happened’ to be playing, that was simply part of the environment or era. But the creation of that ‘moment’ as a heightened moment was due in part to the alchemy of respondents perceived/sensed ‘rightness’ or resonance between the situation, the social relationship, the setting, the music, and themselves as emerging aesthetic agents with feelings, desires, moods such that the music *was* the mood, the mood, the music. To the extent that music comes to interpenetrate experience in this manner, it is informative of that experience, provides – as it did for Willis’ Bikeboys – parameters – or potential parameters because it has to be meaningfully attended to – for experience constituted in real time. It serves as a referent for experience. This environmental appropriation, or consummation of the aesthetic materials that are part of a context, a scene or setting, is how experience comes to be made, felt and known to self. It is a form of bricolage – a reflexive interlacing of experience (feeling, action) and the materials that are accessed as the referents for experience, its metaphoric and temporal parameters. It is no wonder, then, that on rehearing music that helped to structure, to inform experience, respondents describe how they are able to relive that experience; the study of human-music interaction thus reveals the subject, memory and with it, self-identity, as being constituted on a fundamentally socio-cultural plane where the dichotomy between ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’ is, for all practical purposes, null and void.

Music may thus be seen to serve as a container for the temporal structure of past circumstances. Moreover, to the extent that, first time through, a past event was constructed and came to be meaningful with reference to music, musical structures may provide a grid or grammar for the temporal structures of emotional and embodied patterns as they were originally ‘experienced’. Music is implicated in the ways that, as Urry observes with a poignant reference to Proust, ‘our arms and legs ... [are] full of torpid memories’ (1996: 49).

12. Finding ‘the me in music’ – musically composed identities

The sense of ‘self’ is locatable in music. Musical materials provide terms and templates for elaborating self-identity – for identity’s identification. Looking more closely at this process highlights the ways in which musical materials are active ingredients in identity work, how respondents literally ‘find themselves’ in musical structures. It also highlights some of the ways that music is attended to by its recipients, how music reception and the units of meaning that listeners find within music differs dramatically from musicological and music psychological models of music reception and their emphasis on the perception of musical structures. Consider this example from the interview with Lucy:

Q. ... Have you ever adjusted the volume of music that's playing in your home, either to turn it down or turn it up?

Lucy: ... I would sometimes turn it up if something was playing, if it was coming to something I really liked, a nice juicy chord, or a bit that I liked, I'd say, 'Oh turn it up' or I'd go in and listen.

Q. 'A bit that I like' – you've touched on that a couple of times earlier, that's something that's very interesting. Could you give me an example of some 'bit' of some piece of music, some chord or ...

Lucy: Well, usually because it's just a *juicy* chord.

Q. What do you mean by 'juicy'?

Lucy: Well, uh, a lot of notes, and, usually perhaps a lower register. I sing alto and I tend to like cello music and lower register music, you know, really punchy sound and well 'juicy' is the word, huge chords or just, I don't know, just a phrase. I can't think of a particular bit of music but, I think probably in the pastoral Symphony, come to think of it, or there's lots in Vivaldi, Vivaldi has a good – and Brahms. There's certain things, that you just *wait* for that bit and you really enjoy it.

Lucy goes on to explain how these things may be highly personal: 'I don't know whether they're there for anyone else. I really don't know because they're gone in a second'. At the end of the interview, we returned to the topic of these 'juicy' musical moments, the lower register sounds (she describes how she does not like soprano solos), chords and so forth:

Q. ... you said, you're an alto, and you like music that brings out the lower sounds. Why *is* that [laughter].

Lucy: I have no idea! [laughter]

Q. [laughter]

Lucy: Maybe because it's sort of *meatier* or something and uh, a sort of more intense experience.

When pressed further Lucy says that she thinks she likes the lower sonorities because they are:

... part of the background. I think it's more being in the background rather than being, because the soprano tends to have the tune, even if it's not a solo soprano, whereas we [altos] provide the meat – it's the sopranos and the tenors that carry the song if you like and the basses and the altos that *fill out* to make it a sort of – [she stops and looks at me questioningly]

Q. A sonic whole?

Lucy: Yeah. And I think that maybe that characterizes me in life, that I don't like being in the limelight, I like to [pause] –

Q. I'm an alto too [laughter]

Lucy: [laughter] yes.

Q. So, not being 'in the limelight' but being?

Lucy: Being part of a group. And, you know, pressing forward and doing my bit but not [pause] –

Q. Filling in, as it were, the needed middle?

Lucy: Yeah. Seeing what needs doing and doing it but not being spotlighted and being 'out front' sort of thing.

Here Lucy makes an articulation between a preferred type of musical material ('juicy' chords), a concept of self-identity (the 'me in life') and a kind of social ideal ('doing my bit but not ... being spotlighted'). She 'finds herself', so to speak, in certain musical structures that provide representations of the things she perceives and values about herself. In that sense, listening for (and turning up the volume on) the 'juicy' bits is a form of self-affirmation. Simultaneously, these bits provide images

of self for self. Here, the music provides a material rendering of self-identity; a material in and with which to identify identity. Through the mutual referencing of self to music and music to self, Lucy fleshes out the meaning of each. Here then, in relation to the musical elaboration of self-identity, is a virtuous circle: music is appropriated as Lucy's ally, as an enabler for the articulation of self-identity – for its spinning out as a tale for self and other. Conversely, this tale of identity leads Lucy to value and specially attend to certain musical materials. Through this aesthetic reflexive process Lucy enhances the ontological security of her sense of self-identity by drawing upon, and drawing together within a habitat, musical artefacts. Through these artefacts she may come to 'know' herself (and thus project her self in future action- generate herself as an agent). She accomplishes this identity work through the ways she perceives herself as 'like' the material to which she refers, reflexively, to produce her self-knowledge. Here we can follow music as it comes to be converted or transposed – in and through interpretive appropriation – into something extra-musical, something social – Lucy's registration of self-identity. Music is a 'mirror' that allows one to 'see one's self'. It is, also, however, a 'magic mirror' insofar as its specific material properties also come to configure (e.g., 'transfigure', 'disfigure' etc) the image reflected in and through its (perceived) structures.

For a few of our respondents, music was a material they invoked often as a means of marking themselves and their various 'dimensions'. Here, for example, Elaine, a 52-year-old American psychotherapist says:

'I would say about myself that my range of musical tastes which, in talking to other people, I know are rather eclectic. It reflects something else about me which is that I love a wide variety of experiences ... I love food from all around the world, and will try anything you know ... I somehow grew up with an ability to experience diversity or something and enjoy it enormously and be stimulated by it rather than frightened by it or wanting to, you know, trying to keep things too contained ... I could go to a party looking very hippie, you know from the old days, hippie, go out in beads and huge earrings and lots of colour, but go the next night to an opera and look like I'd just stepped off the pages of a very conservative, you know, [laugh] nice young lady type book, so yes and I enjoy that. When I was in my twenties I used to puzzle over this quite a bit and think I don't know who to be, this is my New York, I would think am I a village person or am I a fifth avenue person, I didn't and then I came to this wonderful saying that I could be all these selves and I could choose one so I rather liked just exactly that, being able to play into any role, it's fun.

Q. Do you ever experience a difficulty in deciding on which role, or a sense of between roles? Or is that not a problem?

Elaine: No, not a problem. Its – an unconscious sense almost, of who you need to be and who you are that day and what feels right and, yes, even in a way sometimes you don't understand, you just get dressed and look in the mirror and say this – you could have worn it a week ago and it felt right, but it isn't 'working' today and so you change or put different earrings on ...

Elaine, when asked to account for her self-identity, defines it in terms of its multi-faceted character; she is a person with many dimensions, and her musical tastes and practices demonstrate this diversity, this range of personae that make up her 'self'. Indeed, Elaine was one of the most musically expressive (explosive?) respondents in the study, engaging in a great deal of 'bursting into song':

I'm always singing. My kids – one thing I know this is something I always do, if somebody says something I say, 'Oh, that reminds me' because it will remind me of a song and I'll say, 'Oh there is a song

about that' and then I insist on singing a few lines so they – it's kind of a little joke thing that I do. 'Oh Mom always knows a song about that'. It can be rather loosely related but it's just a fun thing that we do, or that I do.

And here, she makes overt reference to the aesthetic politics of her music practices:

Q. So if we can just go back for a moment ... Would you be putting that kind of music on for the whole family or just you and your husband?

Elaine: Whole family.

Q. Whole family. Now do the kids or does your husband ever put music on or is this something that you do?

Elaine: Something I do.

Q. Do you think within the dynamics of the family that you tend to be the most likely person for putting the music on in communal areas?

Elaine. *Absolutely*. If it's communal, I put it on.

Q. Is that because you are most interested in doing that or is it that you are maybe more dominant in terms of taste?

Elaine: Yeah, I think my tastes are more dominant in the household period. But my husband has very little interest in music ... Um, the kids wouldn't put music on because their music would be intolerable to me [laughter].

Q. OK. That's one of the things I'm getting at. OK. So there's a certain kind of negotiation process then going on here.

Elaine: And I win [laughter] Because I think it goes without saying that as the mother, as the woman, I have the right to set the mood for dinner, even though I don't cook my husband does all the cooking.

Here, Elaine describes how a range of musics provide her with material markers of her multi-faceted 'personality,' that allow her to spin the tale of 'who she is' to self and others. And she is able to project these markers or anchors into her domestic and interpersonal environment through singing and through choosing background music. She is in command of her aesthetic environment, the environment that reminds her of and helps to hold on to the citadel of self-identity. Her environment is furnished – because she is active in this decoration work – with a mnemonics of her self. Within this environment she is strong, easily able to 'find the me in life'.

Elaine describes a diverse array of music in relation to her self-identity and its social-cultural situation. But she does not describe any examples of lapsed or dropped musics in relation to identity. For many respondents, though, identity work is achieved in and through the music to which they have *stopped* listening. Vanessa, for example, describes how she no longer listens to Brian Ferry:

I haven't played him for years. But I was obsessed with him ... I'm not interested at all now ... I think that's a phase of life that's over and – I simply lost interest I think ...

At the end of the interview, she elaborates in more detail why she no longer listens to the music. (Her current favorite at the time of the interview was George Michael's 'Older'):

I think they had a certain style which you wanted to try yourself. Maybe that's why I liked Roxy Music at that particular time. The high heels, the siren look, the diva vamp, you know that type of thing. Roxy Music conjured up all that type of thing. I think you go through you know – now I like jazz – because of my age [52] maybe – I don't know,

Like Lucy, Vanessa was able to locate the ‘me in life’ musically. Unlike Lucy, that location took as its semiotic particle the complex of music and performer image. Also unlike Lucy, Vanessa can be seen to have dropped a particular musical mirror or representation of self when it no longer seemed tenable, when it no longer reflected within the terms with which she could engage in self-description. Thus, in turning to different musics and the meaningful particles that ‘reflect’ and register self-identity, that provide a template of self, individuals are also choosing musics that produce self-images that are tenable, that seem doable, habitable. Respondents seem to access the music of ‘who they are’ through an elective affinity, through a feeling for what seems comfortable. For example, Lucy’s behavioral tendency in social situations resonates with and is reinforced by her avoidance of flashy solo arias. Elaine, by contrast, enjoys just such arias (‘[In the car] I can play it as loud as I want, I can sing to it, every last note of it, you know, that I can without being worried about anybody else’s response, so I love it’ and, ‘by the way, I mostly only like the ones where everybody dies, I don’t like – you know the ones where little shepherd girls poke around, I couldn’t care less, I don’t like that kind of frippery stuff ...’). And Vanessa drops what no longer ‘works’ as a marker of who she is, of her self image.

13. Conclusion: Music as a technology of the self

In response to poststructuralist and postmodern theories of various kinds, the notion that subjectivity is ‘culturally constructed’ is now commonplace within cultural sociology and cultural studies. Too often, though, concern with the interrelation of culture and subjectivity has leaned toward semiotic analysis of cultural forms or discourses; it has not delved equally deeply into the adjacent matter of how, in and through appropriations, cultural forms serve as devices for subjectivity’s constitution.

To pursue this latter issue has been the object of this article. I have tried to show how actors engage in aesthetic reflexive activities of music consumption so as to produce themselves as types of actors imbued with specific feeling forms, attributes and identity characteristics, and as objects of knowledge to themselves and to others. In this respect I think it is fair to suggest that music is clearly an available technology of the self. In relation to the self, music provides a rich array of cultural resources for self-constitution and reconstitution over time: it may serve as a model or template for temporal phenomena (such as forms of conduct or other social processes); it may be perceived to offer many types of semiotic particles that may be construed as ‘emblems’ for self-identity; it may provide a medium that comes to carry conventional or biographical associations. Music may also be understood by its recipients to provide a ‘container’ for feeling or for the quality or character of an experience; it may ‘set the tone’ of a particular experience as it did, for example, in the case of the respondent who heard Debussy’s *La Mer* on the car radio while looking at the sea. Key here is that music’s specific properties may contribute to or colour the shape and quality of social experience, self-perception and emotion.

Music is not merely a sign of existing states but is a building material of those states; it is bound up with the very weft of experience in the making. The virtual parameters music offers – and within which experience may be cast – enter into and inform that experience ‘first-time-through’. For example, when respondents reported using music to ‘vent’ strong emotions, the music’s shape and its quality of movement over time served as a template for the real time shape and duration of emotional experience and its dissipation.

Music is, in short, a material that actors use to elaborate, to fill out and fill in, to themselves and to others, modes of aesthetic agency and with it subjective stances and identities. Looked at from this angle, the ‘cultural construction of subjectivity’ is converted into an empirical topic and a programme of research that extends well beyond the familiar idea that that culture places on offer structures of feeling. Such a project brings us much closer to being able to describe and account for the mechanisms through which cultural materials ‘get into’ even the most personal and private recesses of social psychological life.

Within this article, my focus has been on practice and, partly because of the exploratory nature of the sample of respondents and its size, I have not dwelt upon the more conventional sociological concern with the connections between consumption practices, tastes and social standing. Nonetheless, these are critical issues and they speak to questions concerning the shape of musical culture and its distribution over social groups and territories. It is not coincidental, for example, that respondents drew upon conventional musical associations as they crafted themselves as emotional agents over time and social circumstance – such, for example, that the ‘minor’ mode was employed to emphasize or work through sadness, ‘classical’ works used in ‘serious’ situations, Latin rhythms with energy, loud volume and unusual choices for ‘venting’ anger or frustration, ambient sounds, slow pace, quiet volume and highly textured music for relaxation; all of these associations between music and emotional stance are part of the stock of western music culture, reinforced again and again through the media, through music discourse, and through amateur practices such as I have been describing. Future research in this area would profit from more extensive focus on respondents’ ‘maps’ of music practice and social circumstance, on where, in the context of respondents’ daily lives and categories of experience, different musical materials are most likely to be deployed. Of course, these maps should be elicited through respondents’ discussions of their concrete practices, not from some quasi-analytical task where they are asked themselves to provide ‘a map’. Accumulating ethnographically informed data of this kind may make it possible, eventually, to speak, albeit carefully and subject to constant revision, of the ‘musical structures of action’ within and across social space. To do so would enhance conceptions of agency currently circulating within sociology by illuminating the active but hitherto unexamined role of aesthetic materials in subjectivity’s and action’s formation.

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