

## Introduction

### A Prelude



*The Political Force of Musical Beauty* describes the relationship between a set of powerful musical experiences and the incoherence of political belonging. The book's basic argument is that the act of musical listening enables us to confront complex and mobile structures of impermanent relationships—the sonic interweaving of tones and beats, upper harmonics, and contrasting timbres—that model the experience of belonging to a community not of unity but of difference. The pleasures that derive from this experience are both aesthetic and political. The task of this book is to explore that experience in search of the abstract connections between those two realms. Its key terms are: *music*, *musical listening*, *political community*, and *beauty*. Through an analysis of these terms and a series of close readings of a group of musical texts, I try to demonstrate the intricate and incalculable relation of mutual determination between the experience of musical beauty and the feeling of political belonging.

We all know this feeling: the joy of mutual recognition that leaps within us during moments of dance-floor communion, when the DJ or the musicians *hit it*. We also know this feeling: the profound disappointment that comes over us when later conversation with our dance-floor compatriots reveals vast gulfs of mutual incomprehension. I am interested in both of those feelings. Why is it that we feel as though those with whom we share brief moments of musical bliss must be like us in some important ways? Why do we feel so frustrated when they turn out to be unlike us in matters of equal significance? What is it about this combination of communion and disappointment, of joy and frustration that captures the sense of both shared musical pleasure and political struggle?



**Many scholars, musicians, and activists** have written and sung about the entanglement of music and politics. In most cases their attention has been focused on the political use of music. In most cases, even in high-quality studies such as Craig Werner's *A Change Is Gonna Come*, Marc Anthony Neal's *What the Music Said*, and Robert Cantwell's *When We Were Good*, the central topic is the ways in which political actors used music to forward their goals.<sup>1</sup> These books and others like them have documented the importance of music in social movements. Nearly anonymous Civil Rights marchers sang together to keep their spirits up and to remind each other of their shared purpose. The drive for social justice and the continuity of black community was a central topic in songs written by and sung by Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Nina Simone, and countless others. The right to sexual autonomy has been carried atop melodies sung by Patti Labelle, Gloria Gaynor, Frank Ocean, and so many more. But in almost every discussion of the convergence between music and politics, the music has simply served as a vehicle, conveying already shared political sentiments back and forth among singers and listeners.

*The Political Force of Musical Beauty* tries to do something else. In this book, I show how music, mostly popular music but also some religious and some postclassical music, enacts its own force, creating shared senses of the world. The experience of musical beauty confirms within its listeners the sense that this moment of listening has within it the promise of things being right, of pieces fitting together, of wholes emerging out of so much more than assembled riffs and rhythms. That affect is powerful. It can overwhelm the most cautious and sober rationalist. Just think of Theodor Adorno trying to explain the power of Beethoven, reaching for precision yet achieving only delicate metaphor.<sup>2</sup> When we hear the exquisite combination of right sonic relations, of auditory sensations of tension and release, of concentrated effects of sounding pressure and muscular response, we sense a commonality that feels right, that announces that this *we* that we are at this moment is the right *we*, the *we* that we are meant to be. Dave Hickey describes it this way: "The experience of . . . beauty is inextricable from its optimal social consequence: our membership in a happy coalition of citizens who agree on what is beautiful, valuable, and just."<sup>3</sup>

Of course, this is not literally true. Even when sharing experiences of beauty, we do not agree on all that is beautiful or valuable or just. It simply feels as if we do. This contradiction, the coexistence of a feeling

of unity and shared beauty with the knowledge that those with whom we are sharing that feeling can and do disagree with us deeply on fundamentally important matters, has defeated many attempts to understand the force of musical beauty. How can both of those conditions be true? If we belong to a group forged from musical beauty, not a group brought together by an already existing shared political sensibility, then most often we contain multitudes characterized by difference, not unity. If this is a group formed in the late twentieth or early twenty-first century in the United States, this *we* could include free-market absolutists with proponents of economic redistribution. It could blend Young Earthers with Darwinists, advocates of marriage equality with antihomosexual activists.

In what sense, then, can this be a political community? Simple: political community is not characterized by sameness. A political community does not consist of those who agree on the matters at hand, but instead is made up of those who recognize each other as speaking with legitimate political voices. It is precisely that group which is characterized by the existence of meaningful difference among its members. A political community is one that disagrees. It is one where agonistic struggles for power constitute its daily activities. But not all difference. A political community embraces only some differences, only those differences that are felt to be legitimate. This is the understanding that Jacques Rancière brings to the intersection of aesthetics and politics. The aesthetic and the political converge on what he calls “the distribution of the sensible.”<sup>4</sup> A truly aesthetic musical act is one that reveals the political significance of sounds previously heard as nothing but noise. In this way, an aesthetic musical act changes the shape of the political. It can render previously inarticulate voices in such a manner that their beauty cannot be denied and, in so doing, extend the range of the political to include these voices in its incoherent communion.

This is why I insist on beauty as the locus of music’s power. The experience of beauty is the recognition of the way things could be, the way things should be. The ability to produce beauty, therefore, is an index of the ability to imagine a better future. It is important not to confuse musical beauty with prettiness or quickly achieved consonance. Many of the examples of musical beauty that I analyze delay resolution, refuse traditional harmonic progressions, and avoid melodies that end where they began. They largely eschew clean timbres, replacing them with rasping voices, scraped strings, and electronically enhanced distortion. It is also necessary not to link musical beauty too quickly with an assumed

teleology of musical advance. Although some of the music I discuss was initially heard as avant-garde, other examples were aimed at commercial success and some were deliberate throwbacks to previous forms of musicking. Sometimes the music I analyze is out of tune and out of time. Nonetheless, each of these examples creates a particular set of terms whereby the sounds within them emerge as beautiful. They all produce 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.

Let me rephrase that last sentence. To be honest, every one of the musical examples I analyze transformed my sense of the world. From "A Change Is Gonna Come" to "The Star-Spangled Banner," from "Revolution 9" to "Philosophy of the World," from "November Steps" to "Heroin," from "Rebel Girl" to "Pay to Cum" to Patti Smith's versions of "Gloria" and "Hey Joe," every one of these and the other examples I discuss hailed me instantly, and in so doing, changed me and changed the world that I had been living in, making it somehow new. In this book I insist that those changes were brought about musically, through the "tonally moving forms" that made up the substance of their sounds.<sup>5</sup> I spend a considerable amount of time, therefore, explaining how those sounds worked. The articulation of particular sonic forms is a necessary condition of possibility for the beautiful power of these songs. These forms were combined at the moment of the music's production, capturing an emergent sense of the world. They are historically specific both in terms of the musical conventions they engage (including the social ground of those conventions) and in terms of the political effects they generated. The forms' effects, however, are not frozen at the time of production. They resonate anew with each hearing. Against music absolutists, I argue that the real moment of musical beauty comes in the time of listening. That is when the effects spread, when sounding sources meet musical listening.

Musical listening transforms our auditory attention just when we decide that the sounds we are hearing are music. Musical listening carries the expectation that a set of sounds can be apprehended as formal relations interacting with each other. As awareness shifts, attention focuses. I am not talking about rarified "structural listening" here.<sup>6</sup> Instead I am talking about an everyday occurrence. Everyone listens to music in this way. Even those who have no musical training at all hear some sounds as music and others as noise. The capacity to make that judgment is in-

cumbent upon the phenomenon of musical listening. Musical listening brings together the distributed sensible of the world of the listener and musical beauty's potential to transform that world.

*The Political Force of Musical Beauty* examines several cases of the musical redistribution of the sensible. It begins with an analysis of the layering of misplaced intentions upon the golden voice of Vera Hall. In 1999 the electronica artist Moby released his version of Hall singing "Trouble So Hard," retitled "Natural Blues." While some heard this re-contextualization of her voice as little more than theft, I argue for hearing Moby's work as a means of working through the history of multiple thefts of her voice. The second chapter discusses anthems, the music most commonly thought of as political. It traces the development of anthems from their religious origins through the rise of the nation-state to Civil Rights songs and eventually the pop anthem. Traditional anthems reinforce already existing political communities. Pop anthems are more momentary in their effects. But they have the potential to evoke a new sense of the world. In so doing, pop anthems help to produce the mass-culture phenomenon that Lauren Berlant has named "intimate publics." An intimate public is an achievement. Participants in an intimate public, one created by a pop anthem, for example, feel as if they "*already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience."<sup>7</sup> This moment of commonality is both deeply felt and recognized as tenuous and fragile. A song such as Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come" precisely captures that blend of vulnerable intimate commonality.

Following the analysis of the anthem comes a discussion of two Japanese musicians' attempts to escape the constricting effects of historical experience. In the first half of the twentieth century, traditional and Western forms of music were both mobilized in service of the imperial state. Western "classical" music became strongly associated with the Japanese state's modernizing efforts, while traditional court music retained its associations with the cultural elite. Japanese composers took a variety of stances in response to these conditions, but found it very difficult to escape the widely shared sense that the state was the proper organizing frame for thought and musical expression. In the 1960s, two young musicians paradoxically chose to dive deeper into traditional Japanese musical sounds and strategies as part of an effort to escape that organization of the sensible. Takemitsu Toru and Yoko Ono took up the sounds of ancient Japanese instruments and traditional singing

styles in an effort to forge new connections with Western music and to wrest those sounds from their subservience to the Japanese sphere of influence.

The next two chapters address similar cases. In both, a critical re-evaluation of inherited forms enabled a reformation of the beautiful and a transformation of the musically sensible. Theoretically, these chapters rely on the concept of musical beauty to link Pierre Bourdieu's concept of a field of cultural production to the world of power, a linkage that Bourdieu leaves only at the level of homology.<sup>8</sup> In the mid-1960s, a manufactured pop group that had formed in order to promote a hastily written and recorded single was recruited for an art project funded by Andy Warhol. With that endorsement, the Velvet Underground was able to reorganize the concept of the hit. As a rock 'n' roll band, the Velvets were driven by a desire to attract a large audience. But they were also freed to rethink the combination of sounds and approaches that could combine into a hit. Making the most of that freedom, the Velvets created a distillation of the longing within the pop commodity. Despite its length, topic, and droning sound, "Heroin," their first single, was truly intended for the pop charts; because of its length, topic, and droning sound, "Heroin" achieved a level of conceptual purity that exposed the empty hunger at the heart of the popular. In its beautiful sound, this emptiness was shown to be constitutive of the most normative of desires, linking those desires to the secret longings of the marginal.

In the middle of the seventies, rock developed a self-consciousness that built on the conceptual purity of the Velvets. Artistic amateurism, coded as authenticity, applied a critical attention to rock's conventions as artistic amateurism linked those conventions to the extramusical. Rock was an impure style that borrowed, indeed stole, from R&B, soul, jazz, country, folk, and even music-hall pop. Rock's conventions were not rooted in a coherent musical tradition, but instead were revised and reformed with irregular passion. Patti Smith's highly reflexive reconfiguration of the poet-rock star audaciously revealed the racialized and gendered requirements of the role first inhabited by Bob Dylan. Through her studied performativity, Smith revealed the limits of rock's comprehension of the world. A rethinking of musical authority resulted. Bad Brains emphasized the virtuosity required from marginalized groups. Their focus on speed and precision invigorated the DC scene, challenging (but not defeating) rock's racialized limits even though it reinforced the individualist masculine competitiveness that quickly dominated American hardcore. This competitiveness turned inward as the form of authen-

ticity it generated demanded an ever-greater purity from each person. Following on the dominance of this approach, a rethinking of musical authority resulted. Beat Happening refused virtuosity with an equally focused intensity. The authority of this band grew from its attention to emotional honesty. By rigorously performing imperfection, Beat Happening shifted attention away from the means of performance to its end. Where hardcore's authenticity retained a vigorous individualism and an insistent personal equals political equals personal equation, indie instilled incompleteness, contradiction, and an insatiable hunger for constantly deferred meaning. Riot grrrl's musical genius was to reforge the connection between those two approaches. "Rebel Girl" was an ambivalent anthem that claimed legitimate authority in a world of power to which it did not wish to belong.

Both of these chapters proceed through close readings of recordings. One of the main points of this approach is to draw attention to the specificity of rock's generic conventions. I use a listening method attuned to the antisystematic means whereby great rock recordings create their aesthetic intervention into the political. In each of the recordings that I analyze, a particular performative imprecision becomes an audible hook, a quality of sound that demands the listener's attention. Lacking conscious intention, these musical gestures are nonetheless the key to rock's beauty. They mark the gaps in the capacity of the inherited understanding of the world to generate meaning and value. Again, many of these songs do not fit into traditional understandings of the beautiful. Their beauty and, therefore, their power come from their ability to produce sonic images of a sense of the world just beyond what already is. *Beyond* is the key word here because rock's impulse was never fully utopian; instead it creatively imagined a more intensely responsive world of greater satisfaction but not one where satisfaction itself was thought anew. Rock's beauty derived from a teasing alertness to an inwardly directed formal innovation even as it denied formalism, insisting instead on a direct relationship to the extramusical, which in turn was nothing more than a generic convention. Rock's formal inversion of itself continues to drive its cycle of critical transformation (as we shall see in the concluding chapter).

A sense of lost possibilities, of a kind of melancholy that comes from recognizing the limits of musical beauty's political force, is the subject of the penultimate chapter. Alarm Will Sound is a postclassical new music ensemble that initially formed at the Eastman School of Music. Their concert collage, 1969, imagines a musical collaboration between Karl-

heinz Stockhausen and John Lennon, setting this musical association between two of the most highly regarded musicians of the time in the year after 1968's global challenge to the political status quo. 1969 registers the sense of loss felt by cultural elites as efforts to form a meaningfully broad-based political alliance through musical beauty fail. But 1969 also reminds us of the centrality of musical listening, of the true political force that musical beauty generates. While the melancholy of lost possibilities saturates the piece, the beauty of its own performance in our time is highlighted by Alarm Will Sound's acoustic version of the Beatles' "Revolution 9." By changing the sounding sources from tape collage to strings, winds, pianos, handclaps, and shouts, Alarm Will Sound encourages its audience to listen musically. In the process, the longing for an emergent and decentered collective spreads throughout the performance space.



**The concluding coda** recollects a number of themes that wound their way through the preceding chapters, returning in particular to the first chapter's development of the book's central theoretical framework. The coda also foregrounds a particular problem of listening. Phrased in one way as the Alan Lomax problem and in another way as the "aural imaginary," this problem emerges from the inescapable limits that listening places on the political force of musical beauty. Even if one truly reaches out for new sonic combinations, the listener cannot escape the structuring effects that previous listenings have had on one's ability to hear the new. In fact, innocent listening, a listening that hears only the newness, is impossible. We always listen through previous listening. We always encounter the music of others through our imaginary relation to that otherness. These limits are not debilitating, however. They simply mark the ground on which musical listening takes place. The encounter between the indie rock band TV on the Radio and Tinariwen, a band of Tuareg musicians, figures the practice of musical listening across commonly recognized borders and differences, not as a utopia of commonality but as a leaning gesture, a practice that continues, over time, to recognize the beauty of new sounds, the force of that beauty, and the extension of the political community of difference.

Musical listening requires listeners, socially located listeners with their own specific aural imaginaries, to shift the resonance of the tonalities they hear. The purpose of this book is to call attention to that pro-



cess, not to document its spreading multiplicity and certainly not to account for each individual listening act. *The Political Force of Musical Beauty* draws the bulk of its evidence from readily available sources, from sounds recorded on tape and transferred to wax or encoded into digits and bonded onto plastic and metal. The book describes acts of listening that cannot be replicated completely but from which echoes emerge, mapping aural pathways that you can trace with your own ears and your own leaning capacities. Real moments of musical beauty capture the infinite specificity of that listening. When you and I hit the dance floor together, listening to the elegant dynamism of a perfect beat, we will feel a community that will never be exactly the same for either of us. The force of that difference is what propels us.