
Book Review: *Decomposed: The Political Ecology of Music*

Kyle Devine. *Decomposed: The Political Ecology of Music*. Cambridge & London: The MIT Press, 2019. 316 pp.

To my knowledge Kyle Devine's *Decomposed* is the first study of music as an extractive industry and, in this sense, is a significant intervention. As the window for meaningful mitigation of the worst effects of climate change contracts rapidly, it's important for scholars of music to confront the imbrications of their object of analysis with ecological catastrophe. Devine's scholarship is impressive and his book is eminently readable, but his central wager that a confrontation with music's political ecology be grounded upon music's "materiality" is not one I find convincing. Certainly, I agree that much of the discipline is beset by an idealism that gets in the way of a meaningful engagement with music's social mediations, but I worry that to stake one's argument on a wider "material turn" in the humanities and social sciences, as Devine does, risks a disavowal of the political terrain upon which the current crisis operates.

Organized chronologically into three distinct eras of the history of recorded music, Devine's study is anchored by the staple commodity on which each epoch centered and the form of extractive economy each relied upon. A first epoch running from 1900 to 1950 is defined by the manufacture of shellac discs. The industry's political ecology—the link between environment and human culture—centered on the extraction of "lac," the sappy secretion of a species of beetle native to Southern and Eastern Asia. Not only did this entail damage to trees during harvesting and the use of pesticides to preserve forests where the resin is produced, it also meant brutal, colonial-era working conditions for labor that was precarious, gendered, and badly paid.

Partly due to the interruption of supply lines during World War II, the industry shifted to PVC-based vinyl about 1950 and this marked the start of a second plastic epoch that lasted until the end of the century. The various petrochemical-derived polymers from which LPs, cassettes and CDs are manufactured linked music directly to the oil industry's massive emissions of carbon, toxic fumes and chemicals, not to mention the warfare and ongoing colonial land grabs on which the industry depends.

Here Devine is especially insightful in discussing the irrationalities that beset the industry as it cycled through formats. As manufacturers shifted to increasingly light and efficient materials in the plastic era, per-unit carbon emissions progressively decreased. Yet even as they did so, the scale of production grew faster, especially as markets expanded

across Asia and Africa. This meant that aggregate emissions have only grown over time. For instance, the polycarbonate plastic from which CDs are fabricated is lighter and less toxic than a cassette yet production grew to such an extent, Devine points out, that at peak years of the CD industry, emissions were greater than some small countries.

Devine shows the historical rise in emissions to have continued with the turn of century shift to “data,” the third and final epoch in his account. The intensifying embeddedness of recorded music into everyday life by streaming platforms, along with attendant rising rates of turnover of electronic devices, constantly growing ranges of accessory technologies, such as speakers and headphones, and the waste these all produce, has meant a massive increase in energy consumption. Some of the estimates Devine examines put emissions produced by streaming at double the peak output of the plastic era, all while levels of plastic consumption have not declined.

Devine’s research has grabbed some headlines for its meticulous calculations of music streaming emissions, but for scholars of music, the most significant element of *Decomposed* rests with its bold methodological approach premised on what he calls, borrowing from Bruno Latour, a “deflation” of music (14). This entails the rejection of any aesthetic or phenomenological analysis or indeed, any exception for music whatsoever. The point is partly methodological: echoing currently modish ‘new materialist’ theories, Devine argues that deflating music’s symbolic power permits wider understanding of its “materiality.” But it’s also an ethical claim since, for Devine, the aesthetic “mystification” or “fetish” that sees music as somehow exceptional also underlies the desire that impels its ecologically destructive consumption (13). Accordingly, just as actor-network theorists and new materialists working in other fields have sought to disperse their objects to the wider infrastructures and mediations by which they seem to be constituted, so Devine argues for a “musicology without music.”

But in hinging his dispersion of music to particular staple commodities out of which it’s made, Devine risks obscuring the relations of power that condition the very processes he seeks to understand. Take for instance the so-called “Jevons Effect” on which much of Devine’s history of music’s political ecology is premised. This is the principle derived from nineteenth-century economist William Stanley Jevons, which holds that increases in energy efficiency generate increases in demand. Just as fuel efficiency gains in motor vehicles led to their increased production, size, and performance, so increasingly efficient production of recorded music has led to greatly expanded consumption. Devine seems to adopt the orthodox view that endlessly growing production is enigmatic: people “crave” computers and cassettes, they “prefer” to supplement digital news with printed copy or LPs with download codes (33). On this view, record labels seem merely to fulfill latent demand.

Yet, in a monumental study of the rise of the fossil fuel economy, Andreas Malm shows that the Jevons Effect is beguiling only if we discount the expansionary logic of capital accumulation.¹ That is, where things—including music—are produced primarily for profit, any energy savings will necessarily be used to expand production and generate

1. Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso 2016).

demand.² The implications of such a claim are clear if we look to a key moment in Devine’s narrative: the music industry’s shift to streaming platforms. Not only was this a process driven by the desire to recapture “downloaders” within proprietary zones, it also entailed a concerted ideological project to fabricate demand for music as a ubiquitous service.³ Where markets for recorded music are concerned, ideology, struggle and profitability are inextricable from desire.

Here, it is useful to take a wider historical view to think about the conditions of contemporary music production and consumption and the aesthetic exceptionality of music as a cultural object. We might examine, for instance, the segregation of music from everyday life constituted by the noise and discipline of industrial production or look to the close relation between music machines and industrialization.⁴ For instance, we might consider the protracted process of automation and deskilling that begins with the mass production of the piano, continues with the player-piano and phonograph, and culminates with digital streaming, as the story of capital’s real subsumption of music-making.⁵ This is all to say that understanding music as a political ecology invites an account of logics that transform it into a commodity in the first place.

In tying his epistemological argument to an ethical claim Devine follows much recent theorizing of “materiality.” Where ‘new materialist’ theorists often call for an ethos of “attunement” or “entanglement” to matter as a means of countering a destructive, acquisitive disposition, so Devine argues that deflating music’s exceptionality would help us to “decouple” ourselves from its production and consumption (187). This is to go further than theories that sidestep thorny questions of aesthetic autonomy or exceptionality by constructing idealized ontologies of “sound.” In the aim of deflating its socially constructed value and thus consumer desire, Devine instead black-boxes the musical text altogether. But such a contention is salient only if we understand consumption, as Devine seems to, primarily at the level of the desire of the individual consumer. Yet as long as access to music is primarily grounded on the accumulation of capital, it will continue to be entwined with ideological processes, themselves inextricable from a racialized and gendered global division of the pleasures and the suffering that music engenders. Transforming these processes will require a collective politics; an ethos of consumption will not suffice.

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2. Ibid. See also John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark and Richard York, *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism’s War on Earth* (New York: NYU Press 2010).

3. Paul Rekret, “Melodies Wander Around as Ghosts: On Playlist as Cultural Form,” *Critical Quarterly* 61(2) (July 2019): 56–76; Eric Drott, “Why The Next Song Matters: Streaming, Recommendation, Scarcity,” *Twentieth-Century Music* 15, no. 3 (October 2018): 325–57.

4. Marek Korczynski, Michael Pickering and Emma Robertson, *Rhythms of Labour: Music at Work in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

5. David Suisman, “Sound, Knowledge and the ‘Immanence of Human Failure’: Rethinking Musical Mechanization through the Phonograph, the Player-Piano, and the Piano,” *Social Text* 28, no. 1, issue 102 (2010): 13–34.