



Music and Death: Interdisciplinary Readings and Perspectives

Ed. Marie Josephine Bennett and David Gracon

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Review by Amanda Haste. First published online 27 January 2020.

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This edited collection was prompted by an academic conference on *Music and Death* held in Vienna in 2018, and explores the ways in which various musical cultures “imagine, express and provide ways with coping with death, grief and remembrance from a primarily western framework.” (1) It forms part of the publisher’s Interdisciplinary Connexions series, and its interdisciplinary nature is evident from the start. Its nine chapters are the fruit of scholars in diverse fields such as cultural studies, ethnomusicology, anthropology, media studies, funeral studies and theology, and include some very personal accounts of the authors’ own experiences of loss and bereavement, in the form of “non-fiction storytelling” (1).

The book is divided into three sections, Music and Mourning; Underground Scenes, Alternative Music and Transformation; and Performing Death; each containing three chapters. The first chapter, by Janieke Bruin-Mollenhorst, gives an ethnographical exploration of music used in contemporary funeral practices in the increasingly secularized Netherlands. She focuses firstly on the oft-

employed imagery of angels (either looking over the deceased, or as a transformation of the deceased into angelic form) in social media posts, exploring the concept of the “angelic dead” providing a means of “articulating continuing bonds” between living and dead and of “lived religion” (passim). She also examines the conundrum of the popular choice of *Ave Maria* at funerals, and its function in secularized funeral rituals (13).

Marek Jezinski discusses the musical illustration of funeral rites in contemporary Poland, focusing on Adam Strug and Kwadrofonik’s *Requiem Lodowe* [Folk Requiem], a 2013 work based on original Polish folk tunes. Jezinski argues that a death is seen as a pivotal event in the life of a community, whether a family or an entire village, and that the main themes of the traditional mourning songs show how “the rural people imagine death itself and express their feelings of loss and grief in art to overcome the fear of the unknown” (20).

In “The Posthumous Nephew” Gary Levy relates his own journey – both metaphorically and geographically – of

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discovering his musician uncle Claude, whom he never knew, as Levy prepared to travel from Australia to Vienna. Presented in epistolary style, with a *coda* to each section, Levy relates his uncle's Jewish family, his uncle's work, life and death in Vienna; and his own preparation for the conference: "Vienna. The City of Music. [...] I couldn't possibly go. I couldn't not go," and for the musical examples for his presentation, "There had to be Mozart [...] Jewish musicians [...] some who survived the Nazi death camps [...] some who did not" (35). Dark stuff, but a worthy illustration of the human need for "continuing bonds" with the dead. And in a transformative ending, Levy apprises the reader of a musical collaboration that sprang from this endeavor: "[Claude's] artistic soul, having lain dormant for nearly 60 years, was re-awakening, and inspiring anew" (46). In the autoethnographic essay "You're Nothing: Punk and Death" co-editor David Gracon entwines multiple death-related themes – the death of his mother; the demise of his post-industrial hometown, and of indie record stores – to discuss the transformative power of music: "If it wasn't for punk, I'd be dead" (49). Gracon describes the odd sterility of American culture when talking about death (50) and cites punk as "deeply humanizing" and his "vernacular education" (51), while his local independent record store provided a therapeutic lifeline after the loss of his mother from cancer: "I thought of nothing else in that moment and was lost in the records" while the counter-cultural punk genres "openly embraced themes of death and dying" (53) thus giving him the vocabulary that society could not.

The salvatic quality of music is reiterated in "Healing the Mother Wound: Metal Performance and Grief Management" by the pseudonymous Nachthex, whose abstract opens with: "Music saved my life" (59). This brutally honest account of the sudden and unexpected loss of the author's mother at only forty-five analyses "how metal and metal performance helped me write my trauma into a performing life that ultimately liberated me from my grief," with Nachthex using the Interpretive Performance Autoethnography (IPA) methodological framework to navigate through her own "journey through the abyss" (60). She cites the French phrase *l'appel du vide* [the call to the void] and, as a woman writer and a victim-survivor of domestic violence, writes from a feminist stance of empowerment and post-traumatic growth, asking the question: "how do we use our own experiences as data for

our own research?" (61). Nachthex refers to the "misunderstanding that if you listened to metal then you were a thug" and points to Australian research which, instead of proving "the hypothesis that 'extreme music causes anger'" supports the counter-theory that "extreme music matches and helps to process anger" (68). Following a (frankly) poetic account of a quasi-religious epiphanic experience during a metal gig, her personal epigraph which ends the piece reads: "I still have the grief, loss and pain but I also have metal. Long may she reign" (69).

The section closes with another personal essay in which Brendan Dabkowski explores connections between music, memory, dreams and language through his own life experience, with death taking "centre stage" (71) through his musical and linguistic analysis of the final concert by Canadian rock band Tragically Hip, given when the singer was terminally ill. Dabkowski melds memories of his mother's early death from cancer, and his own feelings about his new fatherhood, with the Tragically Hip performance, suggesting the latter provided him with one of those "otherworldly [...] perfect moments," known to musicians, and the luckier audience members and described by Ben Ratliff as "communicating a complicated human gesture, feeling or interaction" that transcends "the listener's expectation".¹

The final section, on Performing Death, focuses on performance practices connected with death (79). Silvia Mendonça explores the concept of the "vision of death" in her musical composition *Vision of Death (On a January Day)* for solo flute, and the way in which, through their interpretation of the piece, performers construct their own vision through their aleatoric use of the compositional elements (81). Rather than a linear melody, this "short sonic reverie" employs short, fragmentary musical cells of two or three notes (88) which allow for silences, and the composer/author concludes that death is "often associated with an end, a nothingness, a somewhere in the future, but also solitude and silence" and that only in the "linear materialization" of the moment, and the revealing of this "inner space" can the music "be about death" (90).

Jennifer Game then presents a qualitative study examining the interaction of embodied movement and music, with a focus on "emotive narrative representations of risk and death" (93) through Zebastian Hunter's *Empty Bodies* and Game's own circus opera *The Blood Vote*. As she says,

¹ Ben Ratliff, *Every Song Ever: Twenty Ways to Listen in an Age of Musical Plenty* (New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2016) 228.

death-defying circus acts confront us with the ever-present risk of death, effectively undoing the repression of this knowledge demanded by society, and both these musical works “seek to [...] show us our dreams and anxieties, undoing this repression. That is what captivates us” (104).

The final chapter, by co-editor Marie Josephine Bennett, explores the later music of iconic band Queen in the light of singer Freddie Mercury’s impending death from AIDS. Bennett focuses on *The Show Must Go On*, the final track from the album *Innuendo*, released only weeks before Mercury’s death in November 1991, and analyses the music, lyrics and accompanying video to highlight three themes: a life prematurely cut short; immortality; and defiance in the face of death (113). Bennett describes Mercury’s legacy, and the sense of immortality engendered by the omnipresence of Queen’s music, and the recent (2018) film *Bohemian Rhapsody*. In music lies immortality, and for Mercury, “the show does indeed go on” (116).

Conclusion

The topic of *Music and Death* is, it goes without saying, a heavy one, and this volume – and especially the central three autoethnographic essays – is emotionally extremely intense, and at times even painful to read. Coincidentally, I (using my autoethnographic voice) read this volume having just lost my own mother, and the frequent and profound explorations of mother loss and the “mother wound” (Nachthexe, pp59-70 passim) meant I had to take several breaks during my reading to regain my equilibrium and objectivity. The autoethnographic nature of many of the contributions, along with the constant cross-referencing of other authors/chapters gives a sense of community and empathy among the authors, unusual in an edited collection.

A telling stylistic theme also presents itself through the use of sentence fragments, found notably in Levy’s personal journal (33-35), but also echoed in other chapters. The result is percussive: an unforgiving, sharp, stabbing rhythm that serves as a brutal reminder of the way in which grief can hit hard, unexpectedly, its intensity momentarily robbing you of breath.

Music and Death is not an easy read, but it is immensely worthwhile: a combination of gripping real-life storytelling with rigorous cross-disciplinary academic and musical analysis. This is a valuable addition to the literature on death and dying: buy this book and prepare to both emotionally moved and intellectually inspired.

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