

Book Review – Musical Democracy by Nancy S. Love

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“Music is political already in virtue of the fact that music is a practice of human expression or performance working itself out in the world, in particular communities, through the medium of melody.”

Lydia Goehr¹

Have you ever wondered what democracy might sound like? Have you ever listened to the rhythms of politics? People have a very narrow sense of music in their minds, only to be found in melody, rhythm, or lyrics. Therefore, in her book “Musical Democracy” political scientist Nancy Love searches to widen the reader’s perception of democracy by seeing and singing it through music theory.

A New Meaning of Music

People have a very narrow sense of what music means in their minds. They might consider that it is only found in melody, rhythm, or lyrics but what this particular book is trying to explore is that music can be found in everyday language, social movements, national anthems, protest songs, or even political slogans. This is the part where democracy steps in the discussion. In democratic states, music plays a significant role. The melody of democracy expresses itself less through harmony, but more through an orchestra in dissonance. Citizens express their discontent towards a government’s decision, promoting a social movement that stems from the marginalisation of social groups, protesting against an unfair new law that harms the state’s citizens, and the list goes on.

Throughout the book it is argued that a piece does not need notes in order to be characterised as musical. In the first few pages, a different perspective is presented suggesting that even in rhetoric there is musicality. It goes without saying that metaphors add an artistic touch in political speech and make the speaker more relatable. Moreover, the author advocates that in fact, “*voice is music.*” (Love, 2006) Therefore, all linguistic communication carries musical nuances.

Metaphors are everywhere around. The author argues that even in science metaphors can be found within a discussion, something that shows how embedded they are in our everyday language. A

¹ Goehr, Lydia. 1998. *The Quest For Voice, On Music, Politics, And The Limits Of Philosophy*, The 1997 Ernest Bloch Lectures. Berkeley: University of California Press.

great example of metaphors in politics would be the narrative of “*Government as Parent*” in American politics, which varies from “*Nurturant Parent*” to “*Strict Father*”, whether it is employed by liberals and conservatives respectively. Metaphors serve as notes for conveying certain tunes to a particular audience.

Types of Democracy

According to political scientists, there are two types of democracy: aggregative and deliberative (ibid). In the former, the people believe that it is important to have formal institutions that will ensure the proper functioning of democracy, while in the latter people have trust in a more autonomous and liberal way of handling matters in a democratic state. However, they also recognise one more: agonistic. This type is characterised as more conflictual, where social movements have a central role in the promotion of how democracy should work. All three are analysed in depth in the book but what is important to keep in mind, is that all of them use specific vocal metaphors that link each type to its target audience. This is better described by Dunn and Jones in that “*human vocality encompasses all the voice’s manifestations (for example, speaking, singing, crying, and laughing), each of which is invested with social meanings not wholly determined by linguistic content*” (Dunn, Love, 1994). Music affects people on three dimensions, which are aesthetics as composing, language as performing and orality or literality as special form of listening to the resonances of democracy.

The Role of Aesthetics and Languages

On a different note, aesthetics also plays an important role in a people’s reason for following or doing something. It is not only true for different forms of art, but also in social, political, and everyday life, people do tend to be drawn to aesthetically pleasing objects. Throughout the book it is argued that songs always have a touch of politics in their lyrics, given that what artists create has always something to say. Drawing mental pictures in the minds of people listening to their music, talking about social phenomena, marginalized groups, or the self. The author notes that “*music blurs and crosses, defines and expands relationships between self and other, challenging established identities and institutions*” (Love, 2006).

Language has the power to coordinate everyday life, to organize minds, or even to inspire people. Combined with art, and more specifically music, its power reaches other levels. However, there are a few theorists that disagree with the significance of art in political speech. They believe that political speech should be more realistic and dedicated to the point of discussion. Given that art is used in speeches made by more liberal politicians, these theorists tend to be on the more conservative side of politics.

Orality vs. Literacy

Walter Ong wrote that *“in oral cultures, verbal expression involves magical powers, embodied experience, and archaic unities. Sound cannot be sounding without the use of power and, as a moving force, it unifies worlds — interior and exterior, self and other, and animals and spirits”* (Walter, 1977). There is a difference between oral cultures and cultures that value literacy more than anything. These two types of culture have very different perspectives not only when it comes to everyday life but also to political involvement. *Oral societies are correspondingly “conservative,” “repetitive,” and “traditionalist”, while literate cultures tend to overvalue the “book-learned” and “book-learning,” and to undervalue practical experience, spiritual inspiration, and traditional knowledge”* (Love, 2006). This plays a highly important role when it comes to voting, participating in political events, or even protesting by neglected groups making their voice to be heard.

Women’s Music

Women’s music could be described as manifold, feminist, respectful, celebratory, trauma inspired, but under all of those characterizations lies *democratic*. Women with all kinds of stories have the opportunity to communicate them through social movements in democratic states. Female musicians who introduce elements of feminism in their music, or who make comments on society, politics, and justice from a woman’s perspective are needed in order to show the world different narratives. In a democracy every voice has to be heard no matter the background, the colour, or the sexual orientation. Each voice serves as an instrument in the great and particular melody of democracy. Different pieces all pursue the goal of more freedom.

Freedom Songs

“The music doesn’t change governments. Some bureaucrat or some politician isn’t going to be changed by some music he hears. But we can change people—individual people. The people can change governments.”

Cordell Reagon²

There is no better way to explain how music is linked to democracy than mentioning songs about freedom. Ever since people started going to wars, music has been on their side in order to inspire them, suppress fear, or even help them relax before the battle. More importantly, songs are an undeniable element of revolutions which are always about changing the status quo to a more democratic and inclusive society. Lyrics say stories, melody lights the spirit, and in the fights towards freedom both play their role in people’s lives. Music runs through our veins, we have songs about happiness, sadness, thus democracy could not get away. Artists will always be moved by social injustice, history, discrimination, and inclusion. It is their duty to sing their truth and inspire change. This is the most immediate link from music to democracy.

² Reagon, Bernice Johnson. 1980. Songs of the Civil Rights Movement, 1955–1965: A Study in Culture History. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms.

A Lullaby for Goodnight

In conclusion “Musical Democracy” opens a new perspective on democracy, touching not just the rational but also the emotional sides of democratic societies and systems. It truly has different perspectives on how language works when it comes to politics, while at the same time showing how music is linked to democracy through vivid examples. Moreover, it widens the mind regarding the concept of music by characterizing metaphors as musical elements. The types of democracy, with regards to language, are also analysed and enriched in meaning. An exciting concept that draws the attention of the reader is the use of aesthetics in political language and the use of specific words and metaphors that bring certain connotations to mind. The debate between orality vs. literacy brings a linguistic depth when talking about how different cultures deal with social issues, marginalisation, etc. Last but not least, women’s music and music about freedom constitute two kinds of music that have always played their part in evolution and revolution, creating paths towards a better status quo. As a person who has studied both translation and international relations, this book to me was an academically revealing masterpiece, combining two very different fields in the most inspiring way. *Just open your ears and listen because music is indeed everywhere!*

References

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