

---

Antoine HENNION, *The Passion for Music: A Sociology of Mediation*, trans. Margaret Rigaud and Peter Collier (Oxford, Routledge, 2015)

---

It is a curious experience to review Antoine Hennion's classic, *The Passion for Music: A Sociology of Mediation* more than 20 years after its first appearance in French. How does one review a work whose impact has been so deeply felt within its field? For whom does one review this work? For my occasionally provincial colleagues in America, who read little work produced outside their own nation, I want to convey how the sociology of culture within France transcends the Bourdieuan insight that culture reflects social position. For readers of the *European Journal of Sociology*, I want to convey how insights based upon the idea of "mediation" in this rather specialized realm of music speak directly to core, and perhaps hackneyed, debates about the relationship between social reproduction, social constructionism, and agency. Hennion gives us a general model for socio-analysis that is worth engaging, no matter how far away you are from culture and music. And for the specialists within the sociology of music—of which I am not a member—I wish to suggest some curiosities within the development of this field, in particular the lack of a sociologically compelling understanding of aesthetics that transcends constructionism. These specific audiences are unlikely to be satisfied with any of my conveyances directed at them. And so perhaps each will glean something from my comments to other areas less intimate to their own positions.

Readers should know something of my position as a reviewer, particularly as it places me in a space of interest to Hennion. While I am a sociologist of culture, I write little on music and my knowledge of this subarea is limited. In my early life I trained as a violinist, but such training was technical. While I was a performer I was never a music scholar. I often think that I like music too much to ever write on the topic. For me it is a sequestered realm, one more tied to enjoyment than academic reflection. I understand a bit more as to why, after having read Hennion's text.

For I am located firmly within one of two positions that Hennion articulates among those scholars who do work on music. The first are

mostly sociologists, who tend to see music (and thereby, culture) as reflecting social relations. To study music is not to study the object itself. Instead, it is to suggest that there are social conditions that make some musical objects liked by some groups, and disliked by others. There are similarly social conditions that make kinds of music possible. To understand classical music one need know nothing of the sonata form, or the progression of keys with their relative majors and minors, or the logic behind improvisation, or why a particular tune is so catchy. You just need to study what groups tend, on average, to like which objects. And what the matrix of relations is that helped produce the object. The music *sui generis*, does not matter. It simply represents what is truly important, which is the broader social relations that music reflects.

A second group—more interested in humanistic aesthetics—objects to this position. The objects matter. There is something to Bach, or Coltrane, or Beyoncé, that transcends social production and produces a thing-in-itself which we must study, understand, and even appreciate. While the former group might be critiqued for its cold and distant assessment of pleasure, the latter group might well be accused of hagiography. Either there is no beauty in the world, it is all just socially produced, or we have geniuses who transcend social reality. We must choose between the social construction of taste, ambivalent to musical objects themselves, and the ephemeral *deus ex machina* of genius.

This basic, though overstated problem should be familiar to all sociological readers. Do individual phenomena themselves matter? Or should we focus instead on their social contexts of creation? One need not silo Hennion's work within culture, or even more specifically, music. This question, about individual phenomena *versus* contexts of creation speaks to central tensions within the discipline of sociology. Scholars have created elaborate models, integrating multiple levels of analysis, which simultaneously engage the individual, the interactional, and the institutional, to deal with these tensions. In *The Passion for Music*, Antoine Hennion suggests that there is another way. Through the concept of mediation we can escape the Scylla and Charibdis of "it's all social" *versus* "it's all genius."

Two questions emerge for the reader, then. The first is, "What is mediation?" The second is, "How far does this idea travel?" Reading Hennion, the first question is difficult to answer, making the second nearly impossible to engage.

To my American reader a simple lesson from Hennion is that we must stop using Bourdieu so relentlessly and we must similarly reject

a more Durkheimian semiotics. While Bourdieu provides us with helpful correspondences between social position and cultural taste, such a position makes cultural objects no different than, say, physical locations in the world. Rich people live in patterned places, just as they have patterned tastes. Yet cultural objects transcend such materiality, Hennion suggests. Bach is not like a spot of land; it is something more, or at least, something different. Music allows us to link with the world in a way that we might even say is transcendent. The cold logic of correlations does not capture the deeply human feeling of connection.

This analogy falls apart a bit, upon reflection, of course. For people certainly feel deeply about the places they inhabit, and about those they aspire to. For all of Hennion's attention to aesthetics one disappointment is that we do not get a fully-fledged theory from the text about how we should understand it. While Latour appears sparingly in *The Passion*, one cannot help but think of actor network theory, which insists on breaking down the barriers between subjects and objects. Latour's world is one that leaves no room for things like beauty. Hennion's *Passion* clearly fights against this impulse, as the title itself powerfully reflects. But it is difficult to discern if culture, art, and beauty are particular things, different from, say, land, or if they are reflective of something general. Harder still is to discern a model of aesthetics.

The reason this reader has such a difficult time understanding the space for aesthetics in Hennion is that I cannot answer the first question—what is mediation? I concur that we must transcend the dualism between the mediators of art, *versus* how art mediates society. To help us do so, Hennion places this work in discussion with not just Durkheim (via Saussure), but also Adorno, Menger, Becker, Bourdieu, and countless other social sciences. The reading is dizzying, which is to say not terribly clarifying of the position. This may well be the point. For it is not from sociology that we receive answers; our savior is art history.

We glean lessons from Danto, as well as Hauser and, to a lesser degree, Haskell. After a series of discussions of how sociology is full of false starts, we learn that the solution means thinking of art as a “mediation”—filled with “gestures, bodies, habits, materials, spaces, languages, and institutions” but also as a transformation, filled with the diverse ways in which we all describe and experience aesthetic pleasure. This is as close we get to a definition of mediation.

My lack of understanding could be my own failing. For when Hennion writes that, “There is no Bach without a disc or an instrument... music must be re-presented every time” [245], I cannot help but think of the moment when my teacher at conservatory told me, “you play too much.” Her point was that music is a language like any other. It need not be performed; it can be read. Just as we do not need actors, or a stage, or props, or an audience to perform Shakespeare—we merely need the text—we do not need an instrument to encounter Bach. We can read him.

Before I conclude this point, we require an aside. I wish Hennion had not succumbed to the desire to edit and (somewhat extensively revise) this text. One can understand the desire to get arguments “right,” given current understanding. Yet there is something to be said for a book as a social artifact—an object which readers can encounter not in terms of how the author wishes it to be read today, but instead as readers first encountered it. In this case it means when it appeared in French in 1993 and influenced the field. The eighth chapter of this text, on Bach, for example, was first published in 2001 (similar to the ninth chapter, which in its current form was also published some eight years after the original text *Le Passion musicale*).

Part of the challenge of understanding “mediation” within Hennion is that the author has clearly developed the concept in subsequent writings. And, given that the text integrates these developments, the reader has the curious experience of engaging in a kind of genealogy, or perhaps archeology of “mediation.” The intimate and wonderful ethnographic portrait we receive of the Solfège lesson gives us a different sense of mediation than the reflection upon the “authenticity” movement within Bach performers. Rather than enriching the text, then, this reader felt the earth move under my feet.

In the end the lesson seems to be that mediation means thinking of music as “hybrid constructs which are interspersed between human beings, between things, and between human beings and things” [294]. This means studying the social conditions of the production and reception of objects, the objects as things in-and-of themselves, and of the relationship between these two things. I return to my earlier analogy of land here. For we might first note that this model applies to the environment. We might think of the social construction of “nature”; the necessity of understanding the materiality of natural objects themselves; and of understanding the interrelationship of these two processes. Or we could think of this in terms of gender—its social construction, the importance of biology itself, and how such biology is

socially constituted. In the end we have not a model for understanding music or culture, or even an outline of mediation, but instead a heuristic for doing socio-analysis.

Given the appearance of Hennion's arguments in a host of other contexts it is not clear that all English language readers must read this book. But the arguments in this text are worth grappling with, whether or not one works in the area of culture and music. Translators Margaret Rigaud and Peter Collier, and publisher Ashgate, are to be praised for providing them to a wider audience. English readers of sociology inhabit a richer space now that they can encounter Hennion's book, based on his dissertation, well after its influence has reshaped the field of the sociology of music.

I left this text in a somewhat confused, but certainly more enlightened place. Hennion has given us an enormously useful model for how to do sociology. I wish there were more about the relationship between this model and others like it. But it combines social constructionism with materialist inquiry (borrowed from history) in potentially productive ways. Almost all sociologists will likely find something useful in this way of thinking. And for that reason the work is worth an enormously broad engagement, even given its long temporal arch, which can muddle more than it clarifies.

I close by addressing sociologists of music. I am curious about why we need mediation within this model and, more importantly, about what our sociological theory of aesthetics is. It is unfair to ask this of Hennion, who has done so much work to inspire such thinking. Yet to read Hennion is to understand that we should take passion more seriously. To say that "I love Bach" is little more than an expression of social position makes sociology a science without humanity. And so we must have a better sense of what makes art/culture/music different. And, more importantly, is there a sociological understanding of aesthetic experience that, in the last instance, does not rest upon social constructionism? This is where Hennion pushes us; the answer remains elusive.

S H A M U S K H A N