Popular Music (2024). © The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press, page 1 of 3

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Review

Musical Models of Democracy. By Robert Adlington. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024, 223 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19-765881-9
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An actor sits silently on the stage, holding a firehose. Gradually, the audience grow restless, and then, as the silence continues, starts to complain – at which point the performer unleashes a torrent of water, soaking the spectators. The performance ends.

This example appears in Robert Adlington's fascinating and thought-provoking book, *Musical Models of Democracy*. He begins by dismissing the familiar assumption that music, at least popular music, is inherently democratic. It may be accessible in terms of its consumption or its performance; it may claim links to 'the people' in its traditions or sales. These features are taken as examples of its anti-elitism and its opposition to other forms of music. However, as many have noted, popular music's claims to being democratic are themselves contestable (evidence for the prosecution: the US ticket price of $5000 to see Bruce Springsteen).

For Adlington, '[m]usic has no necessary relation to democracy' (p. 1). Furthermore, he argues that democratic principles can find expression 'in many different forms and styles' (p. 4). It all depends on two things: what you mean by 'democracy', and how that concept is realised musically.

The book is as much a text about competing models of democracy (representative, direct, deliberative) and competing theories of politics, as it is a study of music. Adlington deploys the various forms of democracy to identify different ways of making music, and the democratic claims associated with each.

His first example is Elliott Carter, the American modernist who used the idea of democracy to justify his approach to composition. In this version of musical democracy, the performers retain, in Carter's words, their 'musical identity', while 'cooperating in a common effort' (p. 40). However, as Adlington points out, Carter's approach meant 'the modelling of democracy within the constraints of a coherent authorial voice' (p. 61). It entailed wanting 'to be both democratic and in charge' (p. 64).

Such criticisms lead to an alternative model, in which the composer is removed from power, and the performers take charge. Adlington characterises this form of democracy as allowing 'musical indeterminacy', in which, in John Cage's words, 'the performers are no longer [the composer's] servants but are freemen' (p. 69). As well as liberating the performers, this model of democracy was supposed to release the listeners from the assumption that musical meaning was located in the composer's intentions. However, this model too contains a tension between authorial ambition and performer or listener autonomy. The freedoms enjoyed by the audience and artists were the gift of the composer, who, in turn, claims the right to object if the gift is not properly appreciated.

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This second model of musical democracy gives way to a third one, in which sovereignty – in the name of 'empowerment' – is granted to the audience. Adlington uses the case, among others, of the CONNECT initiative, a collaboration funded in 2015 by the Art Mentor Foundation Lucerne, in which audience members took part in both the rehearsal and the performance of a collaboration between several musical ensembles. This participatory variant, however, is vulnerable to the criticism that, rather than creating inclusiveness, it produces relations of inequality. Audience members become 'beholden to the same obligations as the professional performers' (p. 111), or find their agency 'mediated by the terms established by the composer' (p. 114). And in some instances, the audience have revolted, bringing the work to an abrupt halt.

Adlington's final model is labelled 'practising egalitarianism'. It appeals to the idea of deliberative democracy, in which citizens, rather than giving expression to their individual will, work to identify a common interest or general will. In music, this model might be associated with a jazz improvisation or some versions of the chamber group. However, once again, this approach to music-making is caught between conflicting values and practices, between, in this case, the deliberative ideals in which, on the one hand, identity is transcended in the creation of consensus, and on the other, where identity is recognised, rather than erased, in the deliberation. At a practical level, says Adlington, deliberative equality is threatened by 'the different skills and personal histories of the individuals involved' (p. 160).

Central to Adlington's argument is that each attempt to democratise the making of music brings both costs and benefits, favouring one set of interests or values over another. As he makes clear, this is an inevitable feature of democracy, and of democratic music-making. It is inevitable because 'democracy' is what the philosopher W.B. Gallie (1955–6) called 'an essentially contested concept' – that is, a normative concept which allows competing and equally valid interpretations. However, even were it not contestable, it is, as Adlington points out, dependent on agreed rules and procedures that are prior to the very possibility of enacting democratic principles, and which are of necessity neither inclusive nor subject to democratic accountability (the decision to restrict the vote to people of a certain age is an arbitrary one).

The book ends by reflecting on the possibilities of musical democracy in a post-truth, post-foundational political world, where the composition, the performance and the audience now exist in hyperspace, and where once again the 'tensions, inequities, and constraints' of democracy reveal themselves (p. 196).

This provocative book is endlessly stimulating. It might be objected that it could have found more space for popular music, apart from the passing mention of Pete Seeger or the occasional reference to jazz. There may be some merit in this complaint, but it is not hard to see how its argument and approach would apply to the worlds of popular music, and to the politics of Henry Cow and Crass, among others.

This thought aside, the book does beg one question of its approach (for this reader, at least). What happens to matters of aesthetics in the search for democracy? For Adlington, the focus on whether the music is made democratically takes priority over what it is like as music, as opposed to political experience. If democracy is regarded as a means of reaching decisions, then one of the questions that we might ask of the outcome, apart from whether it is reached freely or equitably, is whether it was any good *as a decision* (see, for example, the debate over Brexit). So,

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too, it may be that democratically produced music may be less ‘good’ than that produced autocratically.

Still, these matters aside, the overall effect of this fine book is like that of the firehose. It dowses its readers with its bracing insights.

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