Book Review:

Devine, Kyle. *Decomposed: The Political Ecology of Music.* MIT Press, 2019.

Lac Bugs, Petrocapitalism, and Data: 'Mediatic Musicology Without Music'

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"The phrase *musicology without music* is not a call to abandon music or music research," writes Kyle Devine in the introduction to *Decomposed: The Political Ecology of Music*. "Rather," he continues, "it is a call to expand and multiply those domains by insisting that they are not only tied to but constituted by a variety of ostensibly non-musical people, things, and conditions" (21). The proposition of a musicology without music is certainly eye-catching, but the author leaves little room for doubt that the critical perspective employed in the book is one of deep admiration and respect for music as a field of study. Indeed, underlying Devine's project is a broader idea still: that lifting the veil on music's dirty, damaging, exploitative, and even secretive modes of production is a necessary step to counterbalance tendencies that conceive of music as an idealized sphere of cultural production, often finding form in the analyses of great records, genius composers, and virtuosic performers.

 Decomposed is also a response to other, often misconceived, ideas concerning the historical teleology of music. Specifically with regard to its technological reproduction, which

has been told and retold as a story of dematerialization and immediacy. With the shrinking sizes and portability of playback devices and the introduction of new (largely digital) storage formats, the physical music object itself has disappeared, so the story goes. Combining theoretical, historical, and ethnographic methods, Devine argues that this is simply not the case, and, in fact, the opposite might be closer to the truth. While it might be true that processes of digitization have given rise to the mp3 and the subsequent introduction of streaming services (which in the book is symbolically marked by the year 2000), the physical materiality of music persists: if it didn't, why do hard drives have a finite storage capacity? And how are we to explain the environmental footprint of the streaming service providers that make use of nuclear, coal, and gas to store and deliver thousands of hours of music to consumers at the click of a button?

Before delving deeper into the content of the book, however, it is worth highlighting two features of the approach that contribute to its originality. The first, of course, as stated in the book's subtitle, is its focus on music's *political ecology*, as opposed to more familiar references in music and media research to *political economy* (such as Attali). Though, as becomes readily apparent, economic considerations are just as prevalent within and central to ecological thinking (the economy itself is an ecological phenomenon, it might be argued). Sure enough, this is not the first time music and ecology have been considered together. There is a burgeoning scholarship under the heading of 'ecomusicology' that has been steadily expanding since at least the 1970s, coinciding with increased political action in the environmental movement and its subsequent successes. The composer, John Cage, once even declared that "[music] IS ecology" (229). What *Decomposed* does differently, however, is subsume the material, ecological, the "ostensibly non-musical," into music itself, in order to dramatically

expand the field and potential objects of a properly musical analysis. For many readers this conceptual move will be most welcome, and it leads directly into the second significant feature, the book's theoretical model.

Devine's deployment of the concept of 'mediality' enables him to articulate the heterogenous "situations in which something called 'music' can come to be as it is in the first place" (22). While it builds on recent music- and sociological scholarship concerned with the concept of 'mediation' (Hennion; Born; Prior)—which emphasizes the necessity to situate the ontology of 'music' within the wider context of its multiple networks of operation—the invocation of mediality situates the book firmly in the field of media theory. In the book, mediality facilitates movement beyond isolated instances of mediation—which takes its modern form of operating *between* two positions—preferring instead the conjunction of temporary mediatic states and practices as they appear at a given (historical) moment while emphasizing temporality.[1] In this respect, conceiving of music as what Jonathan Sterne has described as a "media problem" (1), Devine follows a path marked out by new materialist thinkers and proponents of the so-called 'German media theory' through a focus on technical mediums (though not without caution).[2] Specifically, as stated in the introduction, from the perspective of its mediatic conditions, "music can be dispersed not just into discursive constellations but into those things we need to make and hear it" (Devine 22). Focusing on *those things we need to make and hear it*, and the points at which they interconnect, Devine constructs a counterfactual music history since 1900—at least in relation to traditional historical musicology—whose 'supporting cast' includes bugs and rocks, PVC and server farms.

Lac Bugs

Taking inspiration from the approach of Harold Innis, *Decomposed* is centered around music's

staple commodities. From 1900 until the present day, music's three staple commodities are

presented as shellac, plastic, and data, corresponding to the three periods of 1900–1950, 1950–

2000, and 2000–Now, respectively. Of course, Devine's periodizing logic is more strategic

than historically definitive in any concrete sense, as he rightly concedes, as the temporal

boundaries overlap and coexist in a complex variety of constellations. Beginning in 1900 with

Emile Berliner's shellac disc, the first chapter details how the record industry's pursuit of

higher fidelity comes to encompass insect farms, chemistry, open-pit mining, and gendered

formations of labor. "Rooting the glory of art in the inglorious conditions of commerce,

applied science, smoky labs, and dirty chemicals may appear to denote this cultural form from

the virtuous to the vulgar," Devine writes, "[y]et this is art's reality" (43). And indeed, as Marx

noted in the first volume of *Capital*, this is the concealed reality for commodity production

more generally, what he described as the fetishism of the commodity. Reminding us of these,

perhaps, unremarkable truths that underlie the possibility of musical reproduction, Devine is

actually refreshing music scholarship's ability to act as a legitimate site of capitalist critique,

beginning with a self-reflexive critique of its own forms of production (15).

The reader is reminded that the book focuses on textures rather than individual 'texts'

(a choice of word that perhaps reveals something about the author's theoretical background),

so there is a long way to go before we reach the iconic 'sizzle' of the revolving shellac disc,

which is perhaps where some might choose to start their analysis. Even then, the sounds

inscribed upon the surface of the medium do not have access to the depths of its medial

conditions. Beginning in the forests of India where 'lac'—an insect resin used in the

production of shellac—is cultivated, ending on the factory floor of the international record presses, the chapter continues with Devine patiently, and in great detail, describing the processes involved in shellac production, all the while situating the discussion alongside now familiar histories in materialist media theory, such as its relation to Edison's phonograph. But far more than this comparative media archaeology of playback technologies, the book proceeds from the staple commodity of lac to the politics of labor conditions in India, where shellac was refined and processed, before taking a transnational leap to the open-pit rock quarries of North America. Recognition of this medial network, which was in no sense outside of music but integral to its production at the time, is significant for critical discussions of music in the present. Not only does it reveal the unsavory reality behind sound reproduction, it broadens the relationship between music and globalization far beyond the free-market liberalism and proliferation of 'world musics' that have been prevalent since the 1980s (77).

Petrocapitalism

Chapter two centers around various forms of plastic production between 1950–2000, with particular relevance to recent discussions concerning the 'retro-romantic' revivalism of vinyl records, cassette tapes, and now even CDs. Though, as readers of the book would by now be aware, Devine is less interested in the aesthetics of nostalgia—what the critic Simon Reynolds (2011) has called 'retromania'—than he is with the ecological implications of such revivalism (excess carbon emissions, the boom of global supply chains, regulations of waste management, and so on). There is a long history related to the political economy of the LP ('long play') and the 45-rpm record, both of which offered new unique selling points for the recording industry to peddle. The LP, of course, with its expanded storage capacity, gave rise to the album, which shaped the imagination of music making even today (though, with the carnivorous nature of

streaming individual tracks, the appeal of the album might be on the wane). But what lurks in the background of such a revival?

Transitioning from insect farmers to oil tycoons, Devine argues that the move from shellac to plastics in roughly 1950 prompted a complete reorganization of the music industry. As is generally accepted, the emergence of plastic has given rise to a throwaway society (Devine 123), partly because of its price index in comparison to other materials and the sheer mass of products whose fabrication it has enabled (LPs, cassette tapes, CDs, and so on). In 1978, roughly halfway through Devine's periodization of music's 'plastic era,' the total weight of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) used worldwide amassed a staggering 160 million kilograms (while it does not necessarily provide a comparable visual, this is roughly equivalent in weight to 11,680,000 bullion bars of gold which far exceeds the current amount underpinning the US economy held at Fort Knox (Bureau of the Fiscal Service)). Returning to mass plastic products with the vinyl revivalism of late, Devine suggests, the music industry is "bending supply to the winds of demand" (126). On the point that demand drives supply, Devine mounts what could become a convincing critique of (often Marxist) social theorists such as Theodor Adorno, who argued that the products of the 'culture industry' largely functioned to satisfy false needs (needs that were themselves produced by the culture industry). While readers of a particular persuasion may be sympathetic to Devine's argument here, it is unclear whether thinking music ecologically really does undo the cultural fetishism diagnosed by Adorno (following Marx), or reinforces it entirely. Of course, if all consumers were to adopt this ecological view then the story might change, but Devine knows all too well such a task as changing one's worldview on music consumption is not straightforward or without consequence. The decision to conceive of 'music' (and, for that matter, any form of production) in mediatic terms

becomes central in this regard, and Devine's book certainly provides a persuasive case for

doing so moving forward.

Data

Noting the contrast between the relative ease of booting up your preferred streaming platform

and the processes of a globalized workforce that go into placing a vinyl record or a CD on the

shelf in your local store, the third and final chapter of *Decomposed* turns to data and streaming,

2000–Now. In this section, Devine quite pointedly targets fallacious suggestions that processes

of digitalization correspond in any way to the 'dematerialization' of the music-object. Citing

recent examples from journalists and scholars alike, Devine demonstrates how language central

to planetary computation such as 'the cloud' has perpetuated the dematerialization myth. As

those with half a foot in media studies are aware, 'the cloud' refers not to those of the cirrus

variety, but a hardwired network of buildings, underwater cables, servers and server farms,

distributed across the scale of the planet. Indeed, as Devine makes clear, nor is the digital

music file itself an immaterial or 'spectral' phenomenon. While they are imperceptible to the

human sensory apparatus, Waveform audio and mp3 files are physical material entities, and

their production and reproduction require large quantities of energy and social labor time.

Alongside increasing the influence of record labels' in the classic political economic

realms of marketing and advertising, as well as the newer digitized economics of data mining

and so forth, streaming also signals a "political ecology of unending consumption" (138). This

consumption extends the notion of *music as tracks* or singular 'works' of art to the digital

devices used to listen to them—electronic devices whose obsolescence appears to occur much

more rapidly than older playback mediums while mobilizing enormous formations of labor into

the musical process. Take the Foxconn factories where much of Apple's assembly is carried

out as an example, whose labor force collectively amounts to 1.4 million (142). Combined with a highly interesting discussion of the Jevons paradox through which Devine explains that greenhouse gas emissions have remained stable throughout each of the staple commodities discussed in the book, the argument against the dematerialization trope is well constructed and highly thought-provoking. It leaves one wondering how the future of music might be formed in the image of a more sustainable world, or if indeed it can be.

Music to Come?

Devine does not offer concrete recommendations as to where music should go from here. To do so would, of course, be premature. In the afterword to the book, Devine recounts some recurring tropes made by respondents to his work that suggest a return to vocal music and those forms or genres which make use of wood and skins. Alas, the 'obvious solutions' (which could perhaps be read as uncritical) that one might propose would inevitably produce their own accidents—as Paul Virilio (2006) would so often warn. But solutions aren't the task of *Decomposed*. Rather, for Devine, the project is one of drawing attention: if we as listeners and, even more crucially, music fans can begin to hear the ecological within the music itself, then perhaps the winds of change might too blow through our consumption habits and practices. We must work toward composing a universal recognition that "to reproduce sound in particular ways is to reproduce particular sets of social relationships" (168). Traditional musicology, whose focus remains fixed on formal qualities of individual 'works,' could learn a lot by shifting some attention to the formal mediality of the musical stack that Devine lays out so thoroughly. Marking something of a return to the importance of thinking in medium-specific ways rooted in mediality, at least for this reader, *Decomposed: The Political Ecology of Music* signals a timely turn from *what* has already been made to *who* makes it and *how*.

Notes

[1] Though, as Devine notes in the book and elsewhere, recent 'mediation' theories have been very nuanced. As such, the concepts of mediation—as it has recently been conceived—and mediality would need to be subjected to a deeper analysis in order to draw out their similarities and differences.

[2] An important distinction that so often goes unacknowledged, but Devine specifies that he is interested in the Anglophone reception of the so-called 'German media theorists,' such as Friedrich Kittler (23).

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