

BOOK REVIEW

Blake Howe, Stephanie Jensen-Moulton, Neil Lerner and Joseph Straus, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*

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Reviewed by Alejandro A. Téllez Vargas

In recent years, there has been a growing concern among musicologists, ethnomusicologists and music theorists to explore the performing and compositional aspects of music through the lenses provided by disability studies—that is, an interdisciplinary field of study that analyses the socio-cultural meaning of physical, mental, intellectual and sensory diversity. This field offers a ‘sociopolitical analysis of disability, focusing on its social construction and shifting attention from biology to culture’ (p. 1). It replaces the medical perception of disability as a fixed biological condition caused by impairments and instead promotes its perception as a social condition that emerges when different bodies are excluded (p. 2). Broadly speaking, in the medical model of disability, a performer with a visual impairment is disabled by an incapacity to read music scores. In contrast, in the social model, the performer is disabled by the restricted number of Braille music scores available in the local conservatorium library. Disability studies, therefore, establishes a dichotomy between impairment and disability. Impairments are limitations in physical, mental, intellectual and sensory capabilities and, as a result of environmental barriers, they can become disabilities (p. 2).

The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies, co-edited by Blake Howe, Stephanie Jensen-Moulton, Neil Lerner and Joseph Straus, contains forty-two essays (written by thirty-nine authors) that eschew conceptualisations of different forms of behaviour, appearance, functioning, sensory acuity and cognitive processing as limitations for musicians; the authors focus instead on providing new insights into the performing and compositional aspects of music based on musicians’ personal experiences with disability. The essays explore: the boundaries between disability and normalcy; the performance of disabled musicians; the use of music to

create a sense of community among disabled people; the intersections between disability and race/ethnicity, gender and sexuality; the representation of impairments in opera, films and musicals; the unique ways in which music can represent and construct disability narratively; and the celebration of disability culture in music-making. These themes are investigated with the support of numerous accompanying figures, including musical examples and analyses, images, charts and tables. In addition, Oxford University Press has created a companion website for the handbook. There, the reader can find several videos, audio tracks and music scores to support eighteen of the essays.

The handbook is organised into eight sections: 'Disability Communities,' 'Performing Disability,' 'Race, Gender, Sexuality,' 'War and Trauma,' 'Premodern Conceptions,' 'The Classical Tradition,' 'Modernism and After,' and 'Film and Musical Theatre.' These sections are unified, for the most part, 'in their theoretical and methodological connection to Disability Studies, especially its central idea that disability is a social and cultural construction' (p. 6). The first section, 'Disability Communities,' develops an ethnographic model of disability that offers a cultural juxtaposition between notions of ability and disability in the context of non-Western and neurodivergent musicians. This approach enables a careful consideration of the music of children affected by an ASC (Autism Spectrum Condition) and the wide-ranging and multifaceted connections between music and intellectual disabilities. Similarly, it informs an examination of the performance of blind xylophonists in Ghana and transforms Deaf musical culture into a central theme.¹ The performance of Deaf musicians and their use of sign language is coupled with a comparative analysis between deaf and hearing song-signing performers. A focus on visual impairments closes the first section with a historical analysis of music and blindness in France (1750–1830) and a survey of inclusive methodologies of music analysis that take into account the needs of blind and low-vision students.

The second section, 'Performing Disability,' explores the unique ways in which the disabled body can perform music and disability simultaneously with an in-depth analysis of two visually impaired pianists: Imre Ungár and Stevie Wonder. Understanding disability from a performative perspective allows an exploration of disabled British punk rock musicians of the late 1970s and of the representation of disability in Björk's music. An analysis of the Cirque du Soleil's depiction of extraordinary bodies and the participation of disabled African American communities in dancing further reinforces the notion of disability as a performance of identity. In the context of classical music, this section includes a fascinating discussion of enabling technology for musicians with impairments and a study of the often-forgotten differences between visible/invisible and audible/in audible disabilities. Lastly, this section demonstrates the unique ways in which biographical information concerning the composers' personal experiences with disability might influence the reception and performance of their music.

In 'Race, Gender, Sexuality,' the third section, different identity categories interconnect with bodily difference to offer a disability perspective that informs an examination of castrati singers and nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy (focusing on its ascription of disability to African Americans). Intersectionality is further examined in music written in response to the AIDS crisis and hermeneutical analyses of music scores based on notions of normative

¹ The term 'deaf' refers to a hearing impairment or the biological inability to perceive aurally. In contrast, the term 'Deaf' represents the set of cultural values that unite a linguistic minority.

and divergent bodies. 'War and Trauma,' the fourth part, studies the music of war veterans with acquired impairments and the performance of contemporary communities affected by warfare. Some of the central themes include the music performed by Civil War disabled veterans, songs about amputee soldiers, the music of composers who fought in the Great War and the songs of women who acquired vocal impairments due to radiation exposure in the Marshall Islands—an archipelago where the United States detonated sixty-seven nuclear weapons from 1946 to 1958.

The last three sections are organised chronologically. In 'Premodern Conceptions,' the fifth section, the music of disabled composers from the late Middle Ages and the representation of disability in late fourteenth-century songs exemplify the contingent nature of disability. Representations of madness in music from early modern England and of disability in music with biblical narratives close this section. In the sixth section, 'The Classical Tradition,' hermeneutical disability readings of music compositions become the central subject. Disability narratives are uncovered in the music of Haydn, C.P.E. Bach and Beethoven that further demonstrate the otherness of disability. Lastly, this section explores the construction of Robert Schumann and Hugo Wolf as madmen in the popular imagination.

'Modernism and After,' the seventh section, explores the representation of disabled characters in modernist opera and the aural representation of impairments in twentieth-century music. This section contains a thought-provoking essay suggesting a relationship between autism and the language of post-war serialism and an analysis of Michael Nyman's opera *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* (1986). Finally, the concluding section of the handbook, 'Film and Musical Theatre,' scrutinises the representation of disability in a wide variety of films and musicals, and the unique ways in which disability is embedded in their music scores.

The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies differs considerably from previous scholarship for three reasons. First, while it reflects scholarly interest in the analysis of representations of disability based on cultural texts (music scores, recordings, operas, musicals, films and paintings), it also contains analyses of disability based on empirical evidence about how disabled musicians feel about their own embodiment. Second, it reveals a growing concern among musicologists to go beyond the limitations of the social model, advocating instead for a multidimensional model that circumvents conceptualisations of impairments as neutral forms of embodiment. Third, a selected number of essays examine two themes that are often overlooked in cultural disability studies: chronic illnesses and the role of pain.

Criticism of previous publications in this field has pointed out the absence of aging—as a form of acquired disability—in scholarly discussions about physical, mental, intellectual and sensory diversity.² In general, this has been a consistent problem in cultural disability studies. As Mark Priestley explains, since disability and aging have both been culturally constructed in terms of the impaired body, 'older people with impairments are rarely regarded as "disabled" in quite the same way as children, young people or adults.'³ Furthermore, disability activism tends 'to focus on issues affecting those of working age.'⁴ Surely, disabled musicians experience

² See Sarah Schmalenberger, review of Neil Lerner and Joseph Straus, eds, *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music*, *Current Musicology* 84 (2007): 153–8.

³ Mark Priestley, *Disability: A Life Course Approach* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003) 143.

⁴ Priestley, *Disability*, 143.

their impairments differently throughout different stages of their lives; this particular aspect of disability, nonetheless, is left outside the central themes of this publication.

Previous criticism has also addressed the strong rejection of therapeutic approaches to disability,⁵ and the propensity to perpetuate over-theoretical cultural analyses that do not lead to a clear understanding of how to apply academic concepts and ideas to either music or disability.⁶ While analysing cultural representations of disability without paying attention to the structural position that impaired people inhabit in society can become 'a fascination with theory for its own sake,'⁷ the majority of the essays included in this publication do not perpetuate what Tom Shakespeare has labelled the 'conceptual indigestion' of cultural disability studies.⁸ Overall, the forty-two essays offer a clear and well-balanced output of research that brings fresh perspectives from ethnomusicology, historical musicology, performance studies and film studies to the areas of research already explored in previous scholarship.

The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies is a ground-breaking contribution to the field of cultural disability studies and to the recent arrival of musicology within this field of study. This publication is a must for anyone seeking a greater understanding of the representation of disability in music. Readers interested in the participation of disabled people in music-making (rather than in cultural representations of impairments) will find a valuable number of essays. And, finally, those interested in the perspectives that impaired musicians can offer about their embodiments, and in research that promotes their inclusion in music-making, will also find valuable contributions.

About the Reviewer

Alejandro A. Téllez Vargas holds a Masters Degree in piano performance from the University of North Texas and a PhD in music and disability studies at the University of Melbourne. His doctoral thesis explored discriminatory social practices in music conservatoria, orchestras, music festivals and music competitions, as experienced by disabled musicians.

⁵ Giorgos Tsisiris, 'Voices from the "Ghetto": Music Therapy Perspectives on Disability and Music,' *International Journal of Community Music* 6.3 (2013): 337.

⁶ Schmalenberger, review, *Sounding Off*, 158.

⁷ Tom Shakespeare, *Disability Rights and Wrongs Revisited* (New York: Routledge, 2014) 71.

⁸ Shakespeare, *Disability Rights*, 71.