

BOOK REVIEW

Alejandro Alberto Téllez Vargas, *Disability and Music Performance*

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Reviewed by Alex Hedt

The social model of disability is founded on the premise that disabled people are prevented from engaging fully in society not by the inherent nature of their physical conditions, but instead by a series of physical, social and economic barriers erected by those around them.¹ Alejandro Alberto Téllez Vargas's *Disability and Music Performance* ably translates this model from abstraction to reality. Its seven chapters, each adopting a different methodological framework, illustrate how the institutions of Western classical music—its training grounds, orchestras and competitions—discriminate against disabled musicians looking to establish a career in music performance. Téllez Vargas lends his voice to the steadily growing disability studies literature that is unashamedly political in its drive for social change. By examining the 'hostile environment' that disabled classical musicians encounter, Téllez Vargas calls upon readers to 'dismantle the disabling barriers that limit the participation of disabled people in music-making' (p. 168).

Téllez Vargas seeks to counter the assumption that disability is inherently and fixedly negative. Chapter 1 does so by tracing historical attitudes towards disabled musicians, from the 'natural anomaly' (p. 16) of the Middle Ages to the 'freak show' surrounding nineteenth-century performers like pianist Thomas Greene ('Blind Tom') Wiggins (p. 29), to the modern phenomenon of one-handed pianism as an embodiment of 'the desire to make impairments disappear' (p. 36). We see that disability stigma in its current form is, in fact, a relatively recent social construction tied to the emergence of scientific discourses. Téllez Vargas reveals that this stigma sometimes manifests in less obvious ways, but with far-reaching effect. The enduring

¹ As Téllez Vargas acknowledges in the introduction (pp. 3–4), the decision of whether to use disability-first language ('disabled person') versus person-first language ('person with a disability') is contentious even within the field of disability studies. While he uses both interchangeably, arguing that an unnecessary focus on language diverts attention from what he sees as more pressing issues, my own preference is for 'disabled person', which I use here.

critical reception of Beethoven's 'hearing impairment as a sign of divine inspiration,' for instance, 'systematically prevented deaf musicians from becoming Deaf' in two ways (p. 25).² Firstly, it conflates physical attributes and Deaf culture. Secondly, it fosters a tendency to extrapolate the qualities of one disabled musician onto all with the same physical impairment: in this case, the conception of *all* deaf musicians as isolated, lonely composers in Beethoven's image. This concept, known as 'social spreading', becomes a recurring theme throughout the book.

In Chapter 2, Téllez Vargas analyses how university music faculties and conservatoria perpetuate ableism. Using Bruno Nettl's 1995 ethnography of music schools, *Heartland Excursions*, as a starting point, he illustrates how factors such as the hierarchical structure of music faculties, social anxieties about disabilities and the primacy of Western notation disadvantage disabled students. Téllez Vargas then presents a case study of twentieth-century piano pedagogy texts. Read together, he suggests, these texts uphold arbitrary biomechanical standards of 'correctness' as 'axiomatic truth,' and therefore further marginalise disabled pianists (p. 59).

Chapters 3 and 4 explore visual representations of disability. The first examines how disabled musicians are depicted on their album covers, exposing a tendency to crop out or otherwise erase the physical embodiment of disability. Chapter 4 moves to a realm where disabled bodies cannot be erased: live performance. Here, Téllez Vargas compares video recordings of two performances: one by able-bodied pianist Evgeny Kissin and one by Nobuyuki Tsujii, who was born blind. 'With his unique range of performing gestures,' Téllez Vargas writes, 'Tsujii expands the visual landscape of music performance' (p. 101). As such, he suggests, disabled musicians should become more frequent subjects of body-related musicology.

Tsujii remains under the microscope in Chapter 5, this time to examine his participation and eventual victory in the Thirteenth Van Cliburn International Piano Competition. As the sole disabled winner in the competition's history, Téllez Vargas argues that he has inadvertently become the subject of an 'overcoming narrative,' a trope that employs 'the image of successful people with disabilities as an excuse to deny accommodation to non-successful people with impairments.' (p. 106). Téllez Vargas articulates the silent question behind this trope: if Tsujii could succeed with the limited accessibility adjustments already in place, why should musical institutions become more inclusive? By extension, any disabled musician for whom the 'ableist barriers' (p. 121) prove insurmountable is painted as lazy; this has damning consequences for future generations of disabled musicians. The latter part of the chapter is devoted to a case study of pianist David Helfgott, whose place in an 'overcoming narrative' is well known to many through the 1996 Australian film *Shine*. Téllez Vargas notes that Helfgott's mainstream popularity, cultivated by a slick marketing campaign, is at odds with his negative—and indeed, ableist—critical reception. We see in this chapter the myriad ways that able-bodied audiences express 'condescending attitudes' toward disabled musicians.

Chapter 6 examines the effect of ageing on music performance. Here, Téllez Vargas seeks to redress an imbalance in the existing literature on music and disability that has 'overlooked the unique ways in which later adulthood is experienced by composers, performers and audiences' (p. 128). Comparing Claudio Arrau's *Final Sessions* recordings with others from earlier in his career, Téllez Vargas paints a picture of a new 'idiosyncratic performing style' (p. 137), which

² The lowercase word 'deaf' refers only to the physical impairment, while capital-D 'Deaf' is used as a signifier of cultural and linguistic affiliation. See p. 24.

represents 'a complete departure from [Arrau's] earlier emphasis on textual fidelity' (p. 138). The dramatic shift in Arrau's style, Téllez Vargas contends, is not tied to any physical degeneration but is rather a reflection of the 'added wisdom, life experience and cultural knowledge that come with age (p. 138). In the broader context of this book, this analysis appears somewhat superficial. Téllez Vargas himself notes in the introduction to the book that disability studies 'conceptualises disability as a dual condition, one that encompasses the body as well as the social identity of every person' (p. 4). Such a definition does not suggest that every disabled musician under study should be pathologised, but instead acknowledges that the disabled body does influence interactions with the world. By ignoring Arrau's physicality, this chapter addresses only half of the picture. It also does not consider what it might mean that Arrau, in the decades preceding, did not face the systemic barriers to success that an emerging disabled musician might encounter. While these issues naturally lie outside the scope of Téllez Vargas's analysis, their omission demonstrates the difficulty of studying ageing through a disability lens.

These barriers to success become the focus of Chapter 7, which draws on a series of interviews with disabled musicians who gained bachelor degrees in music from public universities in Mexico. Despite Mexican legislation officially forbidding discrimination on the basis of disabilities, participants describe a culture that at best poses some challenges, and at worst excludes disabled people outright. A lack of physical resources, including Braille scores and reference texts, is a source of unsurprising difficulty. More insidious, though, is the ableism often publicly cultivated by the whims and personal misconceptions of individuals in positions of power, whether they be instrumental teachers, academic staff, competition jury members, opera directors or conductors. We see this in unflinchingly honest accounts from people like blind opera singer Tom, excluded from a masterclass by a teacher saying, 'I'm simply too tired to explain everything to you twice' (p. 162). Although the findings of this chapter are limited in their generalisability by the sheer diversity of disabled people themselves, here *Disability and Music Performance* most compellingly demonstrates the need for further scholarship in this field, with the voices of disabled people themselves at its centre.

Throughout the text, Téllez Vargas's desire to provide a platform for these disabled voices is evident. From the outset, he states his position as an able-bodied researcher and ally, in the hope that his transparency will help him avoid the exploitation of disabled people through 'parasitic research' (p. 8). Téllez Vargas's commitment to ethical research permeates other aspects of the book. One major problem with the current state of disability music scholarship, he contends, is its predisposition towards hermeneutic analyses or 'disability readings' of music, which use disability as a metaphor through to shape interpretations. These have the potential to alienate disabled musicians by portraying the 'otherness of disability' (p. 9). Against this landscape, the insights presented in Chapter 7 become particularly valuable, and would benefit from an expanded analysis.

Disability and Music Performance's organisation by methodological approach, rather than theme or chronology, results in the repeated explanation of several key concepts (for example, 'social spreading'). It is sometimes left to the reader to draw thematic parallels between the different case studies. However, this structure can also be seen as a strength. By illustrating several approaches to the study of music and disability, Téllez Vargas invites musicologists from all sub-disciplines to consider the implications of hitherto unchallenged notions of ability in their own work. The clear conceptual and methodological definitions provided at

the beginning of each chapter, as well as the author's attention to ethical concerns, render this book particularly useful for upper undergraduate or postgraduate researchers. Read alongside key texts such as Alex Lubet's *Music, Disability and Society* and Joseph Straus's *Extraordinary Measures*, it models potential approaches for future avenues of study in music and disability. More importantly, though, *Disability and Music Performance* compels its readers to view the institutions of Western classical music in a new light, and therefore has something to offer anybody who has ever set foot in a conservatorium or a concert hall.

About the Author

Alex Hedt is a Master of Music candidate in ethnomusicology at the University of Melbourne. Her current research examines the role of music in the social and cultural fabric of Australia's Deaf communities.