BOOK REVIEW

Fabian Holt and Antti-Ville Kärjä (eds.)
The Oxford Handbook of Popular Music in the Nordic Countries

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017

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While there exists sporadic scholarship on popular music in individual countries within the Nordic region, The Oxford Handbook of Popular Music in the Nordic Countries is unique in its ambition to cover the entire region while also bringing an explicitly transnational orientation to its topic. Part of the book's agenda is to go beyond so-called “methodological nationalism” to explore continuities and parallels in the practices and social contexts of popular music that cut across the Nordic region, as well as situating popular music from the region within the larger context of globalization.

The book's editors, respectively from Denmark and Finland, have assembled an interdisciplinary who's who of scholars working on popular music in the Nordic countries, representing an array of fields including ethnomusicology, musicology, music education, psychology, ethnology, languages, cultural studies, and gender studies. Rather than group the chapters according to country or genre, the editors have chosen to organize the book conceptually in a way that highlights issues and themes that cut across geography and musical styles.

After editor Fabian Holt's introduction, the book contains twenty chapters grouped into three sections under the broad conceptual frameworks of “Geography” (eight chapters), “History” (six chapters), and “Identity” (six chapters). These section headings point to larger processes and continuities within the Nordic region. The chapters are generally around fifteen pages each and thus for the most part tightly focused on their topics. The accessible writing style and short essay format of the chapters will make the Handbook useful for students at all levels, as well as for junior and senior researchers.

Each section contains chapters based on country-specific case studies as well as chapters whose content cuts across the region, finding connections and parallels between the different Nordic states and territories. Even in those chapters focused on developments in individual countries, the transnational contexts of local practices are highlighted. This insistence on the transnational nature of popular music practices in the Nordic region, both across the different Nordic countries and in the larger global context, is one of the major strengths of the book.
One theme creating coherence within the book is musical articulations of borealism. Introduced by folklorist Kristinn Schram (2011), borealism is a critical category intended as a parallel to the well-established concept orientalism, allowing for critical investigation of ways in which the north has been imagined and performed as Europe's internal other—“a location of exotic Otherness”, as Joshua Green describes it in his chapter (p. 112) on Europe's margins that anchors a normative understanding of (central) European identity. Another unifying theme is the ways in which local worlds of musical practice and meaning articulate and are conditioned by transnational dynamics. As Hans Weisethaunet insists in his discussion of the dynamic of roots and routes traversed by musics and musicians between Norway and the USA, “circulation comes first” (p. 92).

While Holt’s chapter provides a macro-view of the dynamic between the popular music mainstream (i.e. English-language pop) and alternative, so-called “independent” sectors, the studies in the book for the most part focus on niche genres such as Christian metal, migrant rap, prog rock, and folk and rock music in minority languages such as Sámi and Karelian, rather than mainstream pop. The book does not, for example, include detailed discussions of Abba, Roxette, or A-ha. This is potentially a weakness of the book in terms of covering relevant topics, but it reflects the current interests and priorities of researchers on popular music in the Nordic region. Overall, the approach taken in the book can be placed within cultural sociology and cultural studies of music. While some chapters consider song texts and imagery in audiovisual media such as video clips, there is little discussion of musical structures, and there are no transcriptions in musical notation. The book’s focus on the cultural practices and social contexts of popular music (as opposed to technical analysis of musical objects) also contributes to its accessibility for readers from different fields within music studies and beyond.

It is impossible to discuss all the individual contributions to the book in a short review; I will mention only a few of the chapters here as a way of indicating the volume’s scope.

The eight chapters in the book’s first section employ a variety of perspectives that can be grouped under the general rubric of cultural geography, ranging from large-scale industry and market geography in the context of Nordic modernity (Holt), through the growing significance of local languages and cultures constructed as authentic in the globalized music market (Joshua Greenberg’s chapter on the Faroese hard rock and metal scene), to the role of transnational music in enabling environmental consciousness and world citizenship in the context of global climate change (Nicola Dibben’s chapter on music and environmentalism in Iceland). These chapters collectively illustrate how the spatial turn in cultural analysis has informed the study of popular music in the Nordic region since the turn of the millennium.

The six chapters in the section “History” not only address the transnational contexts of local music histories, they also collectively interrogate existing historiographies of popular music in the Nordic region. With the critique of methodological nationalism as a starting point, Antti-Ville Kärjä provides what he calls a “metahistorical analysis of popular music historiography” (p. 199) in the Nordic countries via discussion of various scholarly texts, many of them in languages other than English, thus usefully introducing those texts to an Anglophone readership. Jan Sverre Knudsen’s chapter on music in the aftermath of the 2011 terrorist attacks in Oslo and on Utøya explores the use of music in “expressing and transforming the emotional culture of nationhood” (p. 257) in the context of national mourning and trauma. Knudsen argues persuasively that the central role of popular music (including many performances that pointedly asserted the multicultural reality of contemporary Norway) in the staging of grief and mourning in the nationally televised official state memorial
ceremony a month after the attacks illustrates the potential for music to challenge existing narr...nel identity and offer “an alternative, postnational vision of nationhood” (p. 258).

All of the chapters in the book’s third section “Identity” address issues of multiculturalism and music in different Scandinavian contexts (Finland and other Nordic spaces are mostly absent from these six chapters). As Holt notes in his introduction, these chapters “emphasize not Nordic self but alterity and difference” (p. 12); these studies thus collectively constitute the most explicit instantiation of the book’s aim to provide “a critical approach to unitary and normative Nordicness” (p. 14), here through discussion of musical meaning-making practices of the Nordic region’s internal others, both immigrant and indigenous. The chapters by Stan Hawkins, Alexandra D’Urso, and Henrik Marstal focus entirely or in part on music by artists from communities that can variously be referred to as ethnic minorities, migrants, or diasporas. In these chapters race emerges as a major keyword; all of the chapters address the taken-for-granted nature of whiteness in Scandinavian societies, highlighting how the performance strategies and aesthetic choices made by different artists (both “black” and “white”) expose the purported whiteness of the Nordic region as a social and cultural construction. Marstal, for example, employs the concept “New Nationals” in his discussion of how artists of immigrant parentage living in Sweden, Norway and Denmark use urban music genres such as R&B and dancehall to challenge essentialist, exclusive conceptions of national identity and promote a more inclusive concept of citizenship. The chapters by Thomas Hilder and Anne Werner focus on contexts of Sámi music-making and its mediation; here issues of indigeneity, indigenous agency and representation come to the fore. The book’s juxtaposition of chapters on immigrant minorities with chapters on the indigenous Sámi minority is instructive, bringing out both continuities and differences between the ways these particular groups use music as a strategy for relating to the majority white population and for emplacing themselves within transnational musical circuits.

Unfortunately, this volume is currently available only in hardcover, priced for libraries. If it were also released as a more economical softcover, like some other music-related titles in the Oxford Handbooks series, it could potentially be used more widely as a text in courses in musicology, popular music, Scandinavian and Nordic studies, and European studies. The editors have brought together an ensemble of chapters that not only firmly put popular music in the Nordic countries on the scholarly map, but also suggest productive routes for the field of popular music studies as a whole for exploring how music articulates the local, the regional, and the transnational.

References