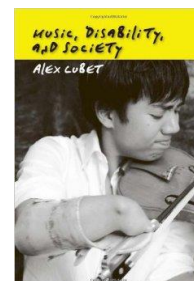


## Music, Disability, and Society (Alex Lubet)

Reviewed by Sherrie Tucker



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Alex Lubet's *Music, Disability, and Society* (2011) is crafted as a series of provocative essays that taken together, posit a set of ideas and approaches of significance to fields of disability studies, musicology, ethnomusicology and music education. Although music educators and music therapists are not the only intended audience for this book, it is a valuable contribution for readers in these areas in a variety of ways, not the least of which is that its imagined readership explicitly includes people with disabilities who have been shunned by music education and musicians who have been disabled and/or impaired by the musical cultures to which they are devoted (a much larger group than one might think). More broadly, *Music, Disability, and Society* addresses all people seeking more inclusive and adaptive musical cultures that presume the interdependency of all bodies, not the dependency of some and the autonomy of others. This orientation holds tremendous implications for many communities of readers, not the least of which are music educators and music therapists.

Lubet is a Professor of Music at the University of Minnesota; a composer, improviser, and performer; and one of the leading (and one of the earliest) scholars of disability studies and music, along with Neil Lerner and Joseph Straus (see Lerner &

Straus 2006). He is the author of many articles on disability and music, and co-editor with Na'ama Sheffi of a ground-breaking two-volume special issue of *The Review of Disability Studies* devoted to music in 2008. Unlike most of the disability and music scholars, Lubet's practice-based focus has led him away from "disability and music" as a sub-interest of musicology (and a growing one at that), in order to situate musical cultures and musical practice within the field of disability studies. In this way, he extends the repertoire of interest beyond therapeutic applications, 'good' and 'bad' representations, and close readings (critical or not) of heroic biographies of superstars who overcome adversity (or "supercrips" in the language of disability rights activism and disability studies), and toward a more practice-based, practitioner-centred analysis in which disability is not something a person has, but as an effect of social constructions of what counts as a normal body. How these social constructions have affected the lived lives of musicians is at the heart of Lubet's essays, or "encounters" as he calls them.

The theory of "social confluence" that Lubet develops through the case studies in *Music, Disability, and Society* insists on disability and impairment as fluid aspects of social status that

people navigate in cultures; aspects that are in no way 'fixed', but may in fact change many times in the same day. He grounds his analysis in the cornerstone of the social model of disability studies and builds a serious consideration of the role of music in social constructions of these dividing lines of normal/abnormal: "What disables musicians comes not only from large external social forces such as legal and insurance systems, but also from within musical cultures themselves" (p. 30). He grounds his analysis in his own experience as a music professor whose injury in 2000 led him on a journey through his profession and day-to-day work life that involved moment-to-moment "identity-transformations" that shifted according to "social, cultural and institutional context" (p. 2). His long and frustrating navigation of seeking accommodations that would facilitate his return to work radically changed how he thought about music. Though the topics of his chapters range from left-handed pianism, the disabling effects of Western Classical music, improvisation and aesthetic values of difference, questions of blind culture and music, and religious organisation of gender and music, his most radical critiques are aimed at university music programs such as the one where he currently teaches. Whether or not one is connected to such a program, he raises many points of critical significance for music educators and students.

Lubet's book opens with an introduction that lays out his theory of "social confluence" (pp. 1-2) as a way of talking about what it means to navigate social and professional life when one of the many socially constructed identity categories and embodied experiences inhabited by a person is shaped by disability and/or impairment. His introduction also deftly exposes musical false binaries of adaptive/autonomous, limits/limitlessness, dependence/independence that disability studies do so well. Two of the fell swoops that were levelled in this as examples include 1) exposing the false distinction between musical composition and adaptive composition, and 2) the folly of thinking that interdependence is a sign of weakness of any culture, including musical ones. Reifying composition at its highest form as not adaptive to limitations ignores the parameters composers must obey if they want their pieces to be performed. Without observing the limitations of instruments and players, even if one presumes an army of supposedly "able-bodied" virtuoso musicians, the composer would write music with little likelihood of performance. On the other hand, composition in

which instrument parts are written within the limitations of the instrument and within reach of the typical ensemble is not only adaptive, but a form of standardisation of tastes, training, and bodies. If that piece is playable only by a class of musicians valued for a very narrow range of abilities unattainable even by second-tier players, it contributes to an exclusive aesthetic that supports virtuosity as an ideal, but also necessitates and promotes 'standardisation' of goals, training, and practice that can injure musicians of all abilities. This is one of many moments when Lubet grounds his argument in disability studies insights; it is not "that people with disabilities are dependent, but that all people are interdependent" (p. 6) and shows us how to productively apply this to musical cultures, including education.

One of the most important insights of this book is Lubet's observance, developed throughout, of the large (uncountable) numbers of injured musicians, who play while injured, rather than face the many professional dangers of disclosure. To analyse musical cultures within disability studies, rather than to pose such questions within a disability studies "sub-interest" of musicology, is a move that Lubet effectively mobilises to discuss western classical music as a culture in which to admit injury is to fail at achieving or maintaining legitimacy as a musician – even though it is the standardisation and its cultural and professional disavowal that holds up this ideal.

This first "encounter" he develops is an exploration of one-handed pianism as a lens for further developing his analysis of standardisation of bodies through repertoire, practice and western classical musical culture. His focus on the critical and audience reception of differently-disabled artists was especially fascinating in that it discloses a hierarchy of worthy and unworthy artists with disabilities in a way that completely disconnects the disability and impairment from the ability for that musician to perform musically. His pragmatic focus on how the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) and Workers Compensation raises questions about what it means for a hand-injured woodwind player to not qualify for accommodations and to silently disappear from the symphony orchestra, while Itzhack Perlman's inability to walk without a cane is recognised as disability, and greeted with applause in critical reception, even though his impairment does not interfere with his playing. I found his discussion of differential reception of hand-injured pianists who have two hands but play with one in comparison to one-handed pianists especially

enlightening on this issue. Lubet's practical approach to embodied effects of disabling effects of musical cultures leads him to consider all aspects that affect performers, including the repertoire available for artists defined as disabled. If composition for one-handed piano is seen as limited, while composition for two-handed piano is considered to have sublime possibilities, it isn't surprising that the latter comprises a very limited repertoire.

Continuing with his application of "social confluence" theory as it illuminates lives of working musicians, Lubet covers such ground in this chapter as how the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Workers Compensation insurance, and human resources departments define disability and extend accommodations to musicians as workers in western classical music. His comparison of orchestral labour and accommodations with professional sports labour and accommodations illuminates a startling difference: In the latter, there exists a "disabled list" whereby temporarily impaired players can recover without losing their jobs. Most symphony orchestras in the USA do not have such protection (pp. 23-24). Throughout this chapter, he continues to develop the many ways in which western classical music, in the USA context, comprises a culture that is intolerant of difference and actually impairs its practitioners. Such a situation is argued by Lubet not to be inherent in composed music and musical approaches to repertoire and instruments. In fact, arrangement and improvisation are both "potential sources of disability accommodation" (p. 40). He identifies a disabling turn when improvisation disappeared from western classical music after Beethoven's death, only to be replaced by the "canonisation of 'inerrant' texts".

Lubet finds hope in "musicians who have been able to craft a praxis around their impairments, to perform their impairments in a manner that yields something musically unique" (p. 41). If classical music is the worst culprit in his analysis of disabling musical cultures, jazz fares somewhat better, through his analyses of jazz artists with disabilities: Guitarist Django Reinhardt, pianist Horace Parlan, and vocalist Jimmy Scott. Instead of a strict adherence to notes-as-written, jazz tends to value unique, even idiosyncratic approaches. Reinhardt, missing two fingers on his left hand, would have been sunk as a classical guitarist, but in jazz became one of the most imitated and celebrated innovators on his instrument (p. 45). Parlan, a polio survivor, is not an "injured piano player", in Lubet's

analysis, since he actually started studying the piano under doctor's orders as a form of physical therapy. If he had wanted to be a classical pianist, with his unimpaired left hand and only the index finger and pinky to rely on in his right hand, he would have been limited to one-hand repertoire. But in jazz he is able to play with two hands and to excel in a cultural system that values "highly original interpretation", not only through improvisation, but through composition and phrasing (p. 54).

The next two chapters are more speculative than the first two. Chapter three poses the question of '*can there be Blind Culture in the way that there is Deaf Culture?*' (p. 69), through a discussion of the Al-Nour wal Amal orchestra in Cairo, whose members are vision-impaired women musicians. Lubet describes the "protocols of learning, rehearsals, and performance" as "uniquely Blind" (p. 75). The discussion is fascinating, though this was one of the instances in which I wished the encounter could have lasted a little longer and provided more grounding in ethnomusicological research. I hope that Lubet or someone else will revisit this with the questions posed by the discussion of this orchestra that performs western classical music from memory and without a conductor. Additionally, explains Lubet, they not only perform western classical music, but a 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic repertoire in which following a conductor for "gradual shifts of tempo and dynamics" is particularly important in a sighted orchestra (p. 87).

Chapter 4 is an essay on comparative gendered restrictions on music-making in religious cultures. This is not an essay that argues and supports a point, but one that reflects on surprise as a teaching moment, and points to additional work that might be done to study fundamentalist religion, gendered musical prohibitions, and disability studies.

Perhaps of most interest to readers of *Approaches* is Lubet's final chapter, "*Bringing it all Back Home... Or Teach Your Children... Well?*", which raises the question of "who are the Others?" in the typical school of music in a research university (using his own institution as a model) – and theorising how schools of music might benefit from reframing pedagogical approaches from a disability studies standpoint. "Who are the Others?" in my music class (music therapy practice, musical community, definition of what counts as music, etc.) is an important question to ask, always, even for those of us who think about difference and

inequalities all the time. This courageous chapter reveals Lubet's many attempts and struggles within his profession and institution to pragmatically reinvent music pedagogies that benefit from disability studies approaches.

My one disappointment with this book is that there are some bold claims about the limitations in other fields of study that are sadly not conversant with ongoing scholarship over the last thirty years that would complement and support Lubet's "social confluence theory". Poststructural, performative, intersectional, and embodied approaches are no stranger to women's and gender studies, queer theory, transgender studies, theories of race, etc. (all of which Lubet erroneously bundles as "area studies" – an entirely different group of interdisciplinary fields, centres, and departments organised originally around "areas" of the world). It would be, in fact, difficult to *find* current scholarship in gender (even transgender), sexuality, and race that support notions of "fixed identities" and strict binaries that he suggests characterise these fields (pp. 93-97, 102-103). Nevertheless, these are adjustments that can be made by readers through supplementary texts.<sup>1</sup> The last fifteen years have also brought a flourishing of exciting intersectional work within disability studies (sometimes known as crip theory) that incorporates feminist theory, radical feminist of colour theory, and queer theory, and, to a lesser extent transgender studies (though Eli Clare's *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* addressed all of these intersections in 1999) and I would have been interested in how Lubet would have engaged with these works in *Music, Disability, and Society*.

It is true, however, that previous works have not

addressed musical cultures within a disability studies framework, and I look forward to reading a new flourishing of work that will benefit from an overlapping of approaches incorporating those posited by Lubet read in conjunction with other current theories of how people navigate intersecting, shifting, changing multiple social fields. Lubet's book is *provocative* in that whether or not one agrees with its arguments, is on-board with the claims, or is compelled by the research from chapter to chapter, this is really not the point of this book. Taken together, or selectively, the chapters form extremely successful "think pieces". Like many highly original books, *Music, Disability, and Society* also bears some idiosyncratic twists and turns that may startle, challenge, excite, and even occasionally frustrate readers. The reader may set down the book from time to time, but the book doesn't leave the reader. I know that my thinking about disability, music, and society has been utterly rearranged in many meaningful ways as a result of reading this book.

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<sup>1</sup> An incomplete list of pivotal works outlining these shifts would include: Anzaldúa (1990), Butler (1999), Johnson (2005), Moraga and Anzaldúa (1981), Muñoz (1999), Kosovsky Sedgwick (1990), Spelman (1988). Musicologists incorporating feminist theory and queer theory in the 1990s also were far from stuck in a 'fixed identity' as an analytic: see Brett (1994) and McClary (1991). Lubet is an important figure in the overlapping of non-essentialist, embodied perspectives of gender, race, disability, and music, but he is in very good company when it comes to eschewing "fixed identity" for approaches to social constructions and performative negotiations of social categories as simultaneous, shifting, fluid, and triggered differently from moment to moment in social interaction with one another, institutions, and discourses.

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