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Review of the doctoral thesis, submitted by Maciej Smółka, entitled: The Sound of a City: A Study of the Phenomenon through the Example of the Minneapolis Sound

As an external examiner of the doctoral thesis, submitted by Maciej Smółka from the Jagiellonian University in Cracow, I find the dissertation thesis acceptable example of original scholarly work. The main aim of the dissertation is to discuss the complex music production from Minneapolis as a marker of twin cities' musical heritage and production in the times when it became almost equal to music activities of the most exposed musician from Minneapolis, Prince. The dissertation is a very good example of a detailed and thorough empirical presentation of musical activities in the chosen city, as well as musical, cultural and communal specificities of the place as the basic ground of its specific production.

The dissertation is incredibly rich in empirical details, and presents many sideway explanations and presentations in footnotes. Its basic intent in defining specific "sound of a city" as a theoretical, or at least heuristic concept, demanded its justification from many different angles, although it comes at the end as more an "open-ended" concept than a "fixed" one.

The structure of the dissertation follows the necessary steps in providing the answer to the main research question on the sound of the city, starting with a city, history of cities and their

sounds, and its infrastructure, people and artists. The third part of the first chapter is dedicated to “the sound”, the concept, its specificities in terms of cities, and its evolution. The second chapter of the dissertation presents the relationship of music and place. It is a substantial and multi-layered presentation of musical geography, music and local history, music and local identity and other perspectives related to music. Only the third chapter is dedicated to methodology, more precisely, methodologies, and presents general overview of popular music studies, approaches in musical geography, local history, American studies, Cultural studies and finally, the chosen approach used by the author of the dissertation, specifically mentioning critical discourse analysis, case study and “a study of the phenomenon” (not necessarily a phenomenological approach).

The main empirical chapter of the dissertation presents the Minneapolis sound with subchapters on the history of the city and its history specifically in relation to “the sound”, divided in the pre-Prince era, Prince’s era and post-Prince Era. The following subchapter presents the character of the Minneapolis sound with specific discussion on its variations, identities, otherness, role of a leader and general synthesis of the Minneapolis sound and the city. The following empirical chapter brings discussion of the sound of Minneapolis with reflection of its locality, people and popularity.

The sixth, and final, chapter of the dissertation opens the discussion of the characteristics of the sound of the city. It starts with the development of the sound of “a city”, discussing roles of artistic community, artistic idea, a leader and a city at large. The second subchapter discusses “the nature” of the sound of the city through aspects of globalization, local music scenes, music genres and begins and ends with the existence of the “sound of a city”. The dissertation concludes with the discussion of modernity, contemporariness and the future of “the sounds”. The dissertation includes a very long bibliography, and appendixes with interviews, maps and photographs.

The dissertation is extremely rich in information about music production of Prince and his albums, on varieties of the local music scene and its history, as well as comparisons with other “sounds”. In that regard, I especially appreciate the comparisons with Polish examples from many different contexts, reminding me of the historical differences in popular music production from former Yugoslav republics, having at least Croatian, Serbian and Slovenian schools of pop song. (And there are many more examples of “sound” attributed to villages, regions, towns, countries, areas and even continents - e. g., J-pop, K-pop or African sound.)

As a reviewer, I have only a couple of remarks and suggestions. There is a long and wide discussion on the concept of scene in describing local music activities and other specific cultural phenomena in specific places (Irwin 1977; Shank 1994; Azzerad 2001; Marchessault and Straw 2001; Crapanzano 2006; Hodkinson and Deicke 2007; Rancière 2013; Hobsbawm 2014; Barzel 2015). It would be very enriching for the discussion of the “sound of the city” to take it more seriously, especially to distinguish the concept of “the sound” from the concept of “the scene”. And there is a lack of more clear definition of a citizenship and communities within the city in terms of older and more recent community studies.

There is, of course, a question remained unanswered: it is the very emphasis on the “sound”, while it might have easily been on music, i.e., for example, “music-city” instead of “the sound” of the city. The relationship of music and sound is only partly put into question in triad of music, place and context (p. 82), but music itself is only exposed as “storytelling” descriptor of reality or an artistic vision of a place, not deeply focusing on its social dimensions in making “here and now” in/of particular place, what becomes extremely important in analysing music video as music, instead of additionally focusing on live music and music production in studio as social interaction. Reading of anthropological classic authors (e.g., John Blacking and Alan P. Merriam) would perhaps expand the scope of the dissertation, but surely provide better understanding of music as culture and music in society. The next remark relates to the discipline in which the dissertation will be passed. As the phenomenon under discussion, the dissertation itself cannot be limited to one single disciplinary field (popular music studies generally span from sociology, musicology and ethnomusicology, anthropology and anthropology of music, cultural studies, cultural geography up to sound studies) and remains transdisciplinary. As he studied phenomenon related to specific space, Maciej Smółka predominately used cultural geographic and cultural studies’ approaches, but he combined them with many other possible approaches, mentioned above, in the frame of widely understood American studies. Still, it seems that collage of approaches is not necessarily an advantage: in the basic intent of a dissertation, to study a particular empirical phenomenon with revealing new knowledge, the author successfully deduced many highly detailed characteristics and particularities of the phenomenon (for example, detailed descriptions of the main institutions located in Minneapolis, and people who contributed to the specific music-related phenomenon), especially as recorded at crucial albums by artists from the area, but somehow failed to provide more focused and at the same time general and overall discussion of the phenomenon, exactly due to incongruences in

diverse methodological and theoretical approaches. Inter- or transdisciplinarity should therefore not result in eclectic mixture of methods used. If we take such an open transdisciplinary approach itself as an experiment and innovative contribution of the thesis, we can understand it as an achievement. It is: even if the times of “grand narratives” are over, we still need “modernist” unified theoretical platform to be able to critically examine a specific “postmodern” phenomenon.

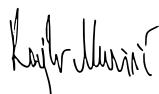
The final remark relates to popular music studies in general, and studies of specific phenomena in general. Popular music itself is a social phenomenon, which understanding and analysis combine and include elements of music, media, production, culture, society, ideas and much more. It is, so to say, a world in a nutshell. Giving the preference to one of its basic characteristics already defines the outcome of the analysis. That means the crisscrossing of methodologies, if we are aiming to catch its empirical complexity, is inevitable; but if the main aim of the research project is related to “the sound”, not sound in general, it is very important to define “the sound” as precise as possible. The author was trying to be consistent in its poetic understanding of sound (characteristic music production the listener relates to the specific place), but it is still much more. Sound studies, though presented in the dissertation (pp. 100-102), especially their prominent students in the present (for example the Cresson laboratory in Grenoble and its studies of urban ambiances), are no more interested in pure sounds and their experiencing on the spot, but on sounding as a phenomenon of living in the city, or anywhere (pioneering work of Steven Feld is here the most important reference). Sound studies is a dramatically expanding field, which did not get enough attention in the dissertation (although the author did use so many sources and compiled substantial reading list) – perhaps it could have contributed to the more persuasive definition of “the sound of” in more general way. On the other hand, more attention to music production (let’s say, sound design in studio) is yet another specific activity important to understand the sound of the place. In empirical part of the dissertations, some more statistical data on popular music production in Minneapolis would surely strengthen authors arguments.

Despite these remarks, the dissertation is definitely an original scholarly work, providing the definition of its main concept at the end of the dissertation, after thoroughly presented empirical examples, announcing it with the statement that “artists do not only create music, but they also can ‘create’ the city” (p. 54). In that sense, “the Minneapolis sound is not a set of songs, albums, or group of artists playing in a given style, but a cultural phenomenon, an idea, which presents a certain perception of Minneapolis and its music scene, it becomes evident

that its continuation may run in the future” (p. 179). The sound of the city as “a cultural phenomenon” (p. 266) is in this dissertation very well defined.

The author shows wide knowledge of music-related social phenomena, he is well informed about recent theories in music, culture and space, and master the main concepts in analyses of the collected material, so I can assess his work as a very persuasive scholarship. The dissertation is in details very innovative and as complex as the phenomenon it discusses. I find it a very successful and open-ended approach to further studies “in the field”, and look forward for its defence.

Rajko Muršič



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