Book review

Everyday Music Listening: Absorption, Dissociation and Trancing
Ruth Herbert

Reviewed by Giorgos Tsiris

Everyday Music Listening: Absorption, Dissociation and Trancing

Ruth Herbert

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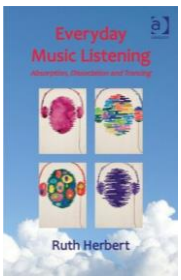

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The extraordinary within the mundane

Everyday Music Listening: Absorption, Dissociation and Trancing is an invaluable contribution to the wider music and health literature. The ideas presented in the book push the discourse of music in everyday life a step further and – as it happens with all pioneering ideas – they challenge some of the current conceptions and ways of understanding music listening.

The author, Ruth Herbert, focuses on music listening in relation to trancing (as well as its manifestations: absorption and dissociation); a topic which has traditionally been the subject of ethnomusicological studies regarding strong or peak experiences. Herbert's work however, takes a different stance and seeks to explore trancing in the perceived 'mundane' everyday musical experience.

Although many of us do not necessarily recall mundane musical (and non-musical) experiences, these are highly significant as they form a great part of our everyday life experience. As Herbert comments:

> "Very little research has been attempted to focus in depth on subjectively perceived qualities of mundane musical experience, partly because such experiences are evanescent and easily forgotten. It is an easy mistake to equate the unmemorable with the insignificant, however" (p. 2).

Thus, the reader is faced with the challenge not only to shift their attention from 'strong' or 'special' moments to everyday experiences, but also to reconsider what counts as significant (for whom and when).

Reviewing this book through my lenses as both a music therapy practitioner and researcher, I was particularly interested in these shifts and their possible relevance to music therapy where often the

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focus has been on moments described as magic, meaningful, spiritual, pivotal, or moments of insight or peak experiences (e.g. Amir 1993, 1996; Grocke 1999; Marom 2004). The book's focus on recognising and exploring the extraordinary within the ordinary is situated within a wider epistemological shift which is noticeable in a range of music-related fields. As music therapist Even Ruud writes:

> "Increasingly, music sociologists and psychologists also report about the power of everyday musicking to energize our lives, to emotionally prepare us to cope with the technologized world (DeNora 2000; Juslin and Sloboda 2001).
>
> Although music always served everyday needs in our culture, such needs and functions were gradually placed in the background" (Ruud 2004: 12).

Indeed, over the past years there has been an increased interest in the study of musical experience (and its function) in *everyday life*; in-*context* and in-*action*. In 2000, music sociologist Tia DeNora published the book *Music in Everyday Life*. This influential book reflected and contributed to the emerging emphasis on studying musical experience in 'messy' everyday living contexts (compared to 'controlled' laboratory settings). In the intervening years this emphasis has been observed in various fields, including music psychology (e.g. Clarke, Dibben & Pitts 2010; Frith 2002; Hargreaves & North 1999), music sociology (e.g. Batt-Rawden & DeNora 2005; DeNora 2013; North, Hargreaves & Hargreaves 2004) and music therapy (e.g. Ansdell 2014; Stige et al. 2010). The exploration of musicking[1] as part of people's ecology and their *situated* daily living and acting, has become a common denominator in all these fields.

Overview and themes

Published in 2011, *Everyday Music Listening: Absorption, Dissociation and Trancing* is one the first books to focus on the nature of music listening as a lived experience and it offers the first extensive 'real-world' study of absorbing and dissociative experiences of music.

The author, Ruth Herbert, works at the Open University and is the former Head of Performance at Dartington College of Performing Arts, UK. Her rich background both as music practitioner and researcher adds to the wealth of ideas and insights presented in her book. Drawing on her doctoral research, the author explores the psychological processes that are performed in a range of different everyday music listening scenarios. Having a multi-dimensional focus, her study takes into consideration not only the interactions between music and perceiver, but also the ecology of the phenomenon, i.e. real-world contexts within which a music listening experience is taking place. Research findings are combined with a thorough literature review drawing on a range of relevant fields, such as consciousness studies, ethology and evolutionary psychology.

The book has nine chapters and it can be seen as consisting of three main sections: The first section (chapters 1 and 2) considers the current understanding of everyday music listening, and music and consciousness. Chapter 1, *'Music and Listening, Music and Consciousness'*, provides a critical overview of the field of music listening research (including content, methods and approaches). On the other hand, chapter 2 focuses on the different ways of conceptualising consciousness and their impact on the psychological study of the experience of listening to music in daily life. Here, the author explores the construct of trance (and its use within different contexts, such as in ethnomusicology, therapeutic practices and lay usage in Western world) and its relevance to the empirical exploration of psychological processes.

The second section (chapters 3 to 7) is the 'core' of the book and focuses on the phenomenology of musical and non-musical everyday experiences. In particular, chapter 3 provides a detailed exploration of the psychological processes involved in listening to music in everyday life. It focuses on a variety of settings where the interaction between people, their environment and musical attributes is explored. This exploration is illustrated with excerpts from interview and diary data. According to the author:

> "[…] although engagement with separate components of experiences involving a distributed attention may appear superficial, the simultaneous combination of activities (e.g. listening, imagining and looking) may trigger richly multimodal and involving experiences, and that the resultant changed orientation to 'consensual' reality may fruitfully be framed as an instance of spontaneous 'everyday' trance" (p. 4).

The meaning of trancing, absorption and dissociation is explained in chapter 4. Trancing is described as

[1] The notion of *musicking* highlights that music is not an object (noun), but an action or a process (verb) (Small 1998; Tsiris & Papastavrou 2011).

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> "[…] a process characterized by a decreased orientation to consensual reality, a decreased critical faculty, a selective internal or external focus, together with a changed sensory awareness and – potentially – a changes sense of self" (p. 5).

As the author explains, the book focuses on a particular kind of trance which is termed 'spontaneous' or 'common everyday trance', drawing from the work of clinical psychologist Milton Erickson (Rossi & Ryan 1985[1998]). Also, the author adopts the gerund 'trancing' – after the ethnomusicologist Judith Becker (Becker 2004) – to highlight the notion of trance as active process rather than discrete state. This resonates not only with Small's (1998) 'musicking', but also with similar terms from the music therapy discourse, such as 'co-musicking' (Procter 2001) and 'healthing' (Aldridge 2004).

On the other hand, absorption (effortless engagement) and dissociation (detachment from self and/or situation) are understood in the book as different manifestations of trancing. Their practical function is that they are self-regulatory processes (often operating at the level of unconscious awareness) that support people's perceptions of psychological health. Absorption and dissociation are present components of everyday (musical and non-musical) experience and can be described as the outcomes of the interaction of a number of psychological processes. The author draws on the concepts of trance, absorption and dissociation as "explicatory frames that throw into relief the self-regulatory nature – psychological and physiological – of much everyday listening" (p. 3).

Both chapters 3 and 4 refer to a large data corpus which was collected via semi-structured interviews and free descriptions of participants' subjective experiences of listening to music. Data was drawn from seven case studies of individuals living in England. Drawing on free descriptions of unfolding experience, the author explores the psychological processes experienced by listeners.

Chapter 5 focuses on musical and non-musical trancing in daily life by exploring what interactions between stimulus and perceiver are particular to music. Chapter 6 explores the significance of imaginative involvement to trancing, while the similarities and differences between musical and non-musical trancing are outlined in chapter 7. The author examines a series of activities and suggests that "music affords a particularly wide variety of attentional loci that facilitate different modes of trancing" (p.4).

In chapters 5, 6 and 7 (as well as in chapter 9), musical and non-musical involvement is compared. These chapters refer to phenomenological self-descriptions and reports from twenty participants, capturing 151 episodes. Here the author compares musical and non-musical (e.g. reading or drawing) involving experiences to assess what interactions between stimulus and experiencer are more prevalent in situations involving music.

Section three (chapters 8 and 9) is more speculative and links contemporary individual experiences of absorption and dissociation to broader areas of inquiry concerning evolutionary antecedents of artistic involvement and the psychobiological function of everyday consciousness transformation. The author draws on ethology and evolutionary psychology (regarding the adaptive value of the arts) and argues that "the arts are 'custom made' for the capacities of the human mind, and so may function as particularly effective sites of involvement" (p. 5). These ethological and evolutionary perspectives on transformations of consciousness lead to the final chapter (chapter 9) which re-examines and re-frames everyday music listening experiences by relating consciousness change not only to psychobiological, but also cultural factors.

Coming from a phenomenological stance where everyday experience matters, instead of focusing on music's effects (as a resource, for example, to regulate mood, emotion or behaviour), Herbert focuses on studying detailed accounts of experience itself. The focus is on charting human experience by adopting a more inclusive and less prescriptive approach. This is why the author's starting point is consciousness instead of mood or emotion.

Although the evidence presented in the book cannot be generalised, Herbert proposes that this evidence can be used as a "basis for a discussion of broader, organizing ideas relating to everyday music listening, and to indicate how phenomenological changes may relate to alterations in conscious functioning" (p. x).

Reflections

Herbert shows how listening "constitutes a performative process" (p. 2). In the same vein, the gerund trancing is used to stress its performative nature. This reflects a movement towards understanding human experience as dynamic, relational, changing, and situated in context, compared to more static conceptions that have prevailed a major part of the philosophical thinking and research over the past centuries. This movement however entails various methodological challenges. As the author suggests, "the boundaries between unusual and mundane experience are very often blurred" (p. 2). She clarifies:

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> "Attaching conceptual labels to aspects of phenomenological experience can be both problematic and revealing. The terms trance, absorption and dissociation are in a real sense constructs: imposed definitions that bundle together different threads of experience in culturally determined ways" (p. 3).

In Herbert's study these problems – which are well-known and familiar to qualitative researchers – are carefully treated. The author respects the phenomenon itself and acknowledges her own pre-conceptions and not knowing.

This book opens up new horizons in the broader field of music and health: it provides a framework for understanding music listening by bringing together research and theory from a wide range of fields. I recommend it to everyone who is interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the subjective experience of music listening in everyday life, as well as the transformations of consciousness that may occur in conjunction with listening to (and making) music. This book can be a useful resource to academics and practitioners, including music therapists, music teachers, community musicians, ethnomusicologists, music psychologists and music sociologists.

This book shows that music is a "particularly effective mediator of experience" (p. 196) and that consciousness can be framed musically. Returning back to my field of practice and study, I would like to encourage music therapists to consider the implications of Herbert's work on understanding the role of consciousness within the context of therapeutic uses of music. Traditionally, consciousness in music therapy has been discussed mainly within the context of psychodynamic music therapy (Austin 1999; Hadley 2003) and Guided Imagery and Music (Bonny 2002; Goldberg & Dimiceli-Mitran 2010). Herbert's perspective on consciousness however, offers opportunities to re-think and re-imagine the role of consciousness in music therapy; it offers opportunities for situated, socio-cultural understandings of music and consciousness in everyday life. These opportunities are central for all those who wish to understand music and its role in everyday life.

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