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Decomposed: the political ecology of music

by Kyle Devine, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2019, 328 pp., $30 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-2625-3778-0

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REVIEW

Decomposed: the political ecology of music, by Kyle Devine, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2019, 328 pp., $30 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-2625-3778-0

This book review is months overdue. My writing was delayed by the disruption and stresses of the Covid-19 pandemic, but also because I had a sense of the uncomfortable message of *Decomposed: The Political Ecology of Music* well before reading it. By accident, generosity or convention, MIT Press sent me two copies of *Decomposed*, in separate packages. Two books of identical thickness, placed with a sizeable gap in between: perfect for lifting my old, tired laptop off the desk and allowing air to flow underneath, preventing it from overheating. (Finally reading *Decomposed* and taking one of the copies from underneath the computer threatened to unbalance the little ecosystem of my makeshift home office.) So *Decomposed* helped solve my tiny, local infrastructural problem – heat (see Starosielski 2014) – before it drew my attention to the much vaster problems of infrastructure and ecology implicit in the mundane device on which I write this review (or you read it) and with which I often listen to music. All this to note that I write this review from within a deeply infrastructural time, when most lives have been transformed by the global circulation of SARS-CoV-2 (carried via local and transnational infrastructures; see Brown et al. 2021) and many of us are more reliant than ever on home computer technologies and their shadowy infrastructural hinterlands. These infrastructural conditions are at once profoundly mundane and profoundly consequential, and, as such, only heighten the message of *Decomposed*.

Decomposed focusses on the material basis of recorded music – commodities such as shellac, plastic and data – and the people, practices, histories and considerable harms hidden behind it. The book is at once highly original and disarmingly straightforward, like noticing (or rather being directed to notice) a secret hidden in plain sight. Devine's topic is enormous, important and seemingly obvious – the literal stuff of everyday music consumption, in our hands, devices and ears every day – yet massively neglected by music studies (with the exception of a few precedents that Devine credits). His central aim is to 'describe (and critique) the conditions of music's political ecology' (20). Glossing political ecology as 'critical attention to the principles of action and the forms of social order that link material environments and human cultures' (18), Devine seeks at once to expand and 'deflate' (14) our understanding of music's materiality and social reproduction. The expansion involves paying attention to topics – materials, infrastructures, industries – that are largely unstudied, despite playing an enormous role in twentieth and twenty-first century musical culture. The deflation (after Latour 1988) involves 'examining the ways that music exists in more or less the same conditions as any other commodity or industry' (14).

This leads Devine to propose a 'musicology without music' (21) that looks beyond familiar disciplinary concerns (musicians, fans, performances, genres, and so on) to the 'seemingly nonmusical' (21) materials, actors and practices that make recorded music possible. Thus one of the strengths and provocations of *Decomposed* is that it deliberately does not contribute to the study of a particular musical genre, but instead shifts attention to political ecology as a 'precondition of [all or, at least, all recorded] music, a key part of its mediatic situation.' (24) The implications of such moves are considerable, but in puncturing notions of musical exceptionalism ('Music is not special. It is ordinary' (181)), in refusing to subscribe to any

preformed definition of what counts as music, and in various other ways, the book contributes to longstanding projects and debates within and beyond ethnomusicology.

The book's three chapters centre on three 'staple commodities' (15) that dominated particular eras in the history of recorded music: shellac (1900–1950), plastic (1950–2000), and data (2000–now). This clear schema belies Devine's sensitive attention to historical overlaps, interconnections, and transformations between and across these eras, as well as to an array of other materials and objects, from CD packaging to the industrial machines and consumer devices used variously to manufacture, store and play these media. Across these chapters, the book describes a troubling litany of issues entailed in music's material composition and decomposition, spanning resource extraction and processing, supply chain dynamics, infrastructural networks, labour practices and exploitation, corporate negligence, energy usage, waste streams, obsolescence, and other environmental harms. Each of these topics is situated within the broader historical processes of industrialisation and industrial transformation that Devine narrates. The chapters are rich with insights that elaborate and deepen the book's central argument, whether concerning gendered labour in the production of recorded music (65-6, 107-9), the implications of Devine's findings for the history of musical globalisation and colonialism (63, 77), or consideration of the different 'logics of possession and dispossession' associated with digital devices in the Global South (145) when compared with those of the Global North. The 'Great Phenol Plot' (50-51), the biology and ecology of the lac beetle, or the fact that limestone 'sounded good' (63) as a filler in shellac records, due to its smoothness under the needle – these and other details lend immediacy to Devine's expansive 'musicology without music'. All this is bound together by a conceptual framework that, although aligned with media theory, actor-network theory and new materialism, remains focussed on the theoretical and pragmatic implications for music studies itself.

Between broad conceptual sweep and evocative historical details, what emerges is a picture of recorded music as both produced by and productive of what scholars now variously call the Anthropocene (a term Devine uses sparingly), Capitalocene or Chthulucene (see Haraway 2015). Devine argues, for example, that music was an 'active contributor to petrocapitalism' (100), because the aesthetic and commercial priorities of sound recording helped to drive scientific and industrial innovations in the production of plastic. Perhaps most troubling is Devine's claim that 'the environmental cost of music is higher than ever before' (160) due to the energy intensity of storing and transmitting music digitally (158) and the 'massification … of devices and listening' (134), not to mention the persistence of older formats. The *Ethnomusicology Forum* guidelines for reviewers ask if we consider the central argument of the book under review 'convincing'. I find *Decomposed* thoroughly convincing, but it is also worth acknowledging that I don't really have the disciplinary expertise to thoroughly assess Devine's conclusions about the extent of music's plastic and carbon footprints. This is kind of the point: musicology and ethnomusicology have been unconcerned with such issues, never mind with training scholars to study them, and, more than this, the difficulty of assessing, or even comprehending, the human and environmental costs of the lives many of us lead is arguably a general condition of privileged life in late capitalism.

This comes across most sharply for me in Devine's ethnographic excursions. The bulk of the book is historical and conceptual in orientation, but accounts of his difficulties in accessing a PVC manufacturing plant in Thailand (2) or cagey streaming services such as Spotify (148) stand in for these broader problems of awareness and understanding that shape contemporary life. Relatedly, the book's use of statistics – this many million kilograms of plastic or CO_2, that many thousand megawatts of electricity – both conveys the sheer scale of the industries in question and, since such figures are remote from everyday life, heightens the experiential dissonance that surrounds Devine's project. Assessing the 'aggregate material

effects of discrete acts' (138, citing Carruth 2014) – for example the global impacts of music streaming, which *feel* disconnected from the mundane ease of streaming a single piece of music – is not just a problem for academics. But such uncertainties should not forestall engagement: as Devine notes, whatever the methodological difficulties of estimating vast quantities of materials or tracing supply chains, 'the amounts are huge and the issues ought to be reckoned with' (xi).

At times, Devine frames political ecology as audible in recorded media: he writes, for example, that the 'the surface noise' of 78 rpm records is 'a remainder that serves as a reminder' (76) of the human and environmental exploitation underlying the medium. Such comments stand in tension with Devine's reflections on the converse dynamic, whereby political ecology is deliberately obscured, and human exploitation and environmental damage remain inaudible. He notes, for example, that streaming companies 'subcontract their consciousness of the energy intensity of digital music's infrastructure' to Amazon Web Services (153) or that smoothly-running infrastructures do 'powerful work to mystify all the people and things needed to build them and keep them running – as well as all the influence they hold over us.' (164)

There is then, and perhaps necessarily, an ambivalence in *Decomposed* that mirrors much broader societal ambivalence about the environmental crisis and our responses to it. Devine states, early on, that 'Guilt is not the goal' of the book, but rather 'understanding' (11). Yet the book makes clear the 'complicity' of musicians and listeners in the harms attending plastic music formats (127-8) and other media. He comments several times on the possibility that such understanding might help to 'improve' (22) the situation the book describes, yet also admits that 'I do not have the answers and I am not especially hopeful' (184). This ambivalence points not so much to shortcomings of the book itself, but to one of the kinds of project it might inform and inspire. We need to understand these sentiments – guilt, complicity, hope, aspirations to 'improve', and so on – alongside the material facts. The 'truly chilling' conditions of workers assembling consumer electronics devices in China or labourers (including children) involved in Cobalt mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo that Devine describes (142-3) perhaps *should* provoke guilt and certainly should provoke outrage. My point is not that Devine underplays these harms – he does not – but that the book should provoke disciplinary debate around how academic 'understanding' of these issues might translate into broader public sentiments – outrage at systems of injustice; care and hope for more liveable futures – and in turn into activism, policy changes and shifts in consumption patterns.

It is mildly hopeful to read that 'user practices' are significant in determining the environmental harms of online media consumption (136). As awareness of music's material impacts continues to feed back into musical culture (not least through this and other scholarly work: Devine's book has garnered considerable media attention), we will need to ask how this reflexivity might remake music's political ecology. Despite justified concerns over moving too quickly to 'next steps' (165), Devine does gesture towards such developments in the form of 'accountable consumers' (164) and 'new formats and post-catastrophic media' (186), although these are mentioned only as tantalising possibilities, asked in the spirit of 'future-oriented research' guided by principles of 'degrowth and sufficiency' (187).

In its sharp originality, far-reaching implications and closing speculations, *Decomposed* helps to set a new agenda for musical research, joining other work on music's material conditions and environmental impacts by scholars including Aaron S. Allen, Eliot Bates, Matt Brennan, Kevin Dawe, Jennifer Post, and others (including contributors to Devine and Boudreault-Fournier 2021). Here, music's political ecology includes not only recording formats, but musical instruments, music festivals, paper scores, radios, stereos, speakers,

travel, touring and more. We might also link Devine's book to other recent work that situates the 'slow violence of music' (27; after Nixon 2011) within the Anthropocene, such as J. Martin Daughtry's provocative article 'Did Music Cause the End of the World?' (2020). But as much as it adds momentum to emergent scholarly concerns, *Decomposed* equally revisits long-standing questions about the role of academia, and music studies specifically – questions that are only becoming more urgent in this time of environmental crisis. A book review might normally identify the potential audience for the work under discussion. *Decomposed* will be of interest to scholars across music studies, history, anthropology, sociology, and the burgeoning, interconnected fields of 'environmental media studies', 'energy humanities', 'discard studies' and the like. Its readability, timeliness and lightness of theoretical touch will also likely endear it to musicians, reporters, listeners and others outside academia, including – let's hope – policy makers. But to delimit the book's audience is to underplay its relevance: the insights and concerns in work such as this matter for all of us, not only as academics, but also – to adopt Devine's at once expansive and 'deflationary' mode – as humans.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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