

Bad Vibrations: The History of the Idea of Music as a Cause of Disease

Ashgate 2012, ISBN: 978-1-4094-2642-4, by Dr. James Kennaway

Henrik Marcussen, MD, DMSc*

Bad Vibrations is a very exciting, well written and intelligent survey with a focus on the dark side of music. The good side is already well known as to how music may stimulate, give pleasure and enrichment and act as therapy. Music is also supposed to have pain relieving benefits used in the dentist chair or during minor operations. Besides, we have heard about the ancient history how Orpheus with his song could soften the wild animals and impress even the Gods and we have learnt from our own time about the Mozart effect as a stimulus, listening to Mozart may cure a variety of disorders. But in *Bad Vibrations*, James Kennaway outlines and argues from the history of music and his research from scientific literature how music and listening to music has been used, misused or interpreted in a pathological way. We can see examples from Nazi Germany and the Cold War period of music as brainwashing and recently as a weapon in modern warfare and most worryingly used as an instrument of torture.

The book demonstrates the opinion in the 18th century about the pathological aspects that music could generate. Oversti-

mulation roused by music was conceived to inflict illnesses and especially in the nervous system and foremost in women. The glass harmonica was regarded as a dangerous stimulator for tension in the nerves and as such, connected to Franz Mesmers invention and his use of “animal magnetism”, was supposed to exert a magical influence compared with hypnosis or even hysteria. A whole chapter is dedicated to Richard Wagner and the atmosphere of elicit erotism associated to his work, claiming by research from that time, late 19th century, that the sexual power of Wagner’s music could for instance be seen as a medical condition leading to homosexuality. Further, that music of the same standing as Wagner’s could cause noxious effects for the nervous system and psychic reactions, a point of view that may be seen in association with the contemporary development of neurology and psychiatry as new medical disciplines. Psychiatry, especially, gave reason to music as a presumed provoking factor for neurasthenia. Misogynistic and moral condemnation was an important medical and social partner in the frequent discussions of music’s dangerous sensuality.

Kennaway’s presentation was on a hypothetic level for the first three of five chapters which described music’s presumed noxious effect for illness or immorality. *Bad Vibrations* deals with the last 80 years in

*) Correspondence to: henrik.marcussen@net.telenor.dk

terms of the alleged fears of how listening to “wrong” music could lead to some states to pursue their citizens. He shows that the medical and critical debate gave the political rationale for persecution of music, musicians and musical institutions in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. The propagators of Nazi ideology adopted the concept of deterioration (*entarted* in German) to defame atonal music, jazz and above all, works by Jewish composers and musicians. The concept of *entarted* became fixed to a new norm, the ideal of a music dictated by laws of racial origin. Therefore, in Nazi Germany and the communist dictatorships, the fear of music’s foreign influence meant that musical hygiene had become state policy, leading as a consequence to thousands being silenced, exiled, sent to concentration camps or into Gulags, or murdered. Race has in medical opinion in America played a major role as a presumed damaging effect to the nervous system by the coming of Afro-American ragtime and jazz, leading to the undermining of health. The last chapters of *Bad Vibrations* show the further acceleration of the misuse of music for mind control and as a weapon. Examples are given from the Cold War, the Korean War and as an interrogation technique and as such, even more overt since 9/11. Music as well as white noise has been used as sensory and sleep deprivation with the purpose to intimidate prisoners, which is a clear violation of the United Nations Convention Against Torture §1.1.

James Kennaway is an historian of medicine with a joint appointment in Philosophy, Medicine and Health at Durham University. He specializes in the relationship between music, aesthetics and the body, with research interests in the history of physical and mental illness. His broad knowledge to this subspecialty of medical literature is considerable and in-depth and reveals

grotesque ideas and ideologies. It is an impressive fieldwork he presents to unveil this shady side and delusion of music. As an historian, he remains objective to this controversial subject, but elsewhere he has emphasized that while morality about music could for the most part be dismissed as nonsense, music has nevertheless been shown to “be seriously bad for our health after all”.

Bad Vibrations is well supported by notes, references, bibliography (48 pages) and addresses for further study with equal benefit for readers with interests in psychology, medicine, music and human rights.