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Eric DROTT, *Music and the Elusive Revolution: Cultural Politics and Political Culture in France, 1968-1981*

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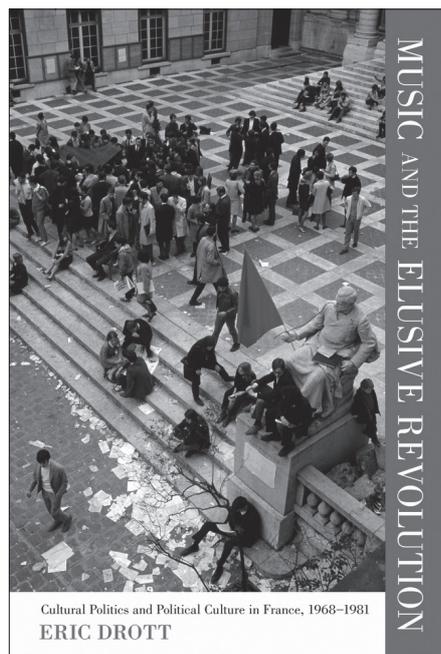
Whether in culture-industry product or news-reel-mediated memory, the Anglo-American 1968 is always soundtracked (usually with Hendrix's House Burning Down, or the Stones' Sympathy for the Devil). But the story of Paris in May is all visuals: the beautiful model borne aloft and waving a Vietnamese flag, the blocky, powerful posters and wall-scrawled slogans. So it's only recently that scholars have paid extended attention to the role played by music during the *événements*. That's not to say that the moment has been ignored entirely. Pierre-Albert Castanet's early-1990s pieces, though sincere, were rhapsodies of untested (counter)cultural commonplace; works like Ludovic Tournès' *New Orleans sur Seine* (1999) and Jedediah Sklower's *Free jazz, la catastrophe féconde* (2006) gave much more nuanced readings within their broader examinations of musical culture. In English language work, French events – when not drowned out by experiences closer to home – have often been treated in the same way, though Beate Kutschke and Barley Norton's edited volume, *Music and Protest in 1968*, published by Cambridge in 2013, incorporates the French 1968 into its global perspective. Responsible for that contribution is Eric Drott, whose own 2011 book, *Music and the Elusive Revolution*, is by far the fullest treatment of May's musical dimension.

And a dimension it was – but a problem, too. Drott begins by describing an RTL news broadcast from the night of May 13, when the occupation of the Sorbonne was in full swing. One of those swinging was a stride pianist, playing, perhaps, on the

grand piano that the book's cover photo shows sitting in the university's open courtyard. But his jazz, Drott writes, can be heard being barracked by others in the crowd of militants and protesters: "Go and talk instead of playing this shit music!" (p. 2). Anxieties around the status and potential of music – either an accompanist to and agent of change, or else a sideshow detracting from the real political business at hand – run through the debates that Drott so skilfully narrates and interprets throughout. The differences of opinion were between those who imagined the moment as totally refiguring the relationship between cultural and political life, and those more traditional, more moderate politicians. Such has been mirrored in the moment's historical interpretations: the contrast exists in the French literature too, but in English these competing trends are perhaps best represented by Kristin Ross's work, which pays tribute to and imaginatively reinhabits the radicals' theoretical creativity, or else writing by Michael Seidman, which emphasises cultural continuities before and after the supposed rupture of May.¹ For his part, Drott would rather show the extent to which the radical and the indulgent, the performative and the procedural, the sincere and the opportunist coexisted in the Paris streets. His study represents the words and actions of privileged interpreters – critics and intellectuals – but also listeners, activists, musicians; the overflowing of aims and vocabularies gives the book an enjoyably appropriate noisiness.

An introductory chapter lays out the musical history of May and June, giving detailed read-

Music and the Elusive Revolution



ings of the actions and aims of *groupuscules* that represented and aided striking musicians, and occupiers of state institutions like the Odéon and the Conservatoire. A more theoretical strand explores the crowd mobilizations of L'Internationale and, often in conservative response, La Marseillaise, this a revealing study of musical semiotics in massive action. At the centre of the book are studies in three musical discourses – free jazz, pop/rock, and contemporary art music – though as a chapter on musical genre makes explicit, this was not a moment in which such boundaries were allowed to remain unchallenged, the social divisions that stylistic distinctions were seen to enact being put under attack from all

sides. Here, Drott examines the difficult negotiations of political ideology, lyric language and musical style that were led by chansonniers like Léo Ferré and Dominique Grange in the attempt to find a truly “popular” political voice.

Not the least of the book's strengths lies in its rescuing of figures like Grange, or the pianist-composer François Tusques, musicians now almost unknown outside France (and hardly more famous inside). Tusques is a key player in a chapter on free jazz, but this section centres on a discussion of the *Tiers-mondisme* that became so important to the music's French critical reception. Along with the work of African American writers like LeRoi Jones, it was writing by Fanon and other anti-colonialist figureheads that led to the widespread (if contested) critical framing of American fire music as part of a global struggle against imperialism – a struggle that many of the French critics and musicians concerned had witnessed first hand while on national service in Algeria. A chapter on pop and rock examines the ways in which the music was put, or subjected, to political use. *Gauchistes* stormed ticketed festivals to undermine (they said) the capitalist foundations of rock, while others attempted to formulate a kind of “politics of pleasure” that would recognize the revolutionary charge of sex, drugs and rock n' roll. A final study of art music wanders amid the vagaries of French cultural policy, charting the development away from the high-art paternalism of the Malrauvian 1960s and through the more diverse and inclusive politics of 1970s *animation*.

Drott follows the implications of 1968 through to the election of François Mitterrand in 1981. Perhaps it would have been useful to take a longer look at what the Socialist government sometimes advertised as the enactment

of 1968 ideals: early on, the *soixante-huitard* culture minister Jacques Lang claimed that those events had “prefigured the changes that we in the government are currently entrusted with inscribing in everyday life”, but however inclusive, however decentralized, the state’s recuperation of a politics so centred on *auto-gestion* – and which had demanded the refigur-

ing rather than the reform of political and cultural relations – was extremely conflicted.² But that’s for another book. In its rich, contrapuntal reading of musical, social and intellectual history, *Music and the Elusive Revolution* is a great achievement.

Tom PERCHARD

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Endnotes

1. Further to the right are those many conservatives who have argued that the events ushered in a period of consumerist hedonism and irresponsibility, a position straightforwardly maintained by Nicolas Sarkozy during his 2007 Presidential campaign.
2. Christofferson, *The French Socialists in Power*, 90.