

The Social Value of Music (in the context of European regeneration policy)

Keynote address, European Music Council Annual Forum

Glasgow, April 19 2013

I was asked to talk to you today about the social value of music in the context of regeneration, which I will do, though rather indirectly. My talk is organised as a mathematical series: I will present 5 propositions, consider 3 consequences of those propositions, and come to 1 brief conclusion.

My first two propositions are linked.

First, policy makers don't make music, musicians do.

Second, a music industry does not create a music culture; rather, a music culture leads to the development of a music industry.

These propositions seem obvious to me, as a sociologist, but they are often forgotten by policy makers, particularly in the context of regeneration, when policies to support the development of music businesses are taken to be the same thing as policies to support music making. They are not, and my point here is simply that people make music because that is what humans do. Music making has been essential to the development of human sociability and, to this day, people make music not primarily to make money but as a necessary part of everyday social activities—putting children to bed, worshipping in a church, supporting a football team, having a party, etc. It's worth remembering that for many musicians today, as for the last hundred years (playing many different kinds of music), performing at weddings is a steadier and

more significant source of earnings than, say, the returns from copyrights or record sales. One of the more foolish arguments for the extension of the copyright term in EU law was the suggestion that without its potential returns musicians would cease to make music. They wouldn't. Music making is not an activity driven by such economic considerations (though the economic exploitation of music making may be).

My third proposition is that **what matters to musicians, what is most significant for their musical activities, is a combination of the right spaces, sufficient time, and a network of appropriate people.**

Again, this proposition seems self-evident though it needs fleshing out a little. *Spaces* are needed in which to practise, rehearse, learn to perform, perform, possibly record, etc. *Time* is needed to develop craft skills, to learn an instrument, to learn to play with other people and to an audience, etc. The *people* needed are teachers, role models, mentors, fellow musicians, fans, obsessives, etc.

I haven't got time to go into more detail here but will note three further points: first, the complexity of such networks of space/time/people and the variety of possible settings (musical instrument dealers, coffee bars, youth clubs, record shops, arts centre, pubs, youth clubs, etc.) As times and technologies change, so do the networking possibilities, but music making depends on places to gather. Second, this is one reason for the particular importance of school, colleges, universities and conservatoires, not just as places where musical skills are learned, but also as places where musical communities develop, audiences are formed, and possibilities realised.

Third, the development of social media has certainly meant new sorts of virtual spaces and networks. These are important in many ways, but music making and listening remain material events; they cannot be replaced by online practices.

My fourth proposition is that **what matters to music listeners is also the right combination of spaces, time and people,**

This proposition should not need elaboration though I would stress again, first, the variety of venues needed to make different kinds of musical experience possible, not least the varied experiences of dancing to music; second, the relationship of the rhythms of musical entertainment to the rhythms of life—work and leisure, growing up, courting, ageing, changing jobs, moving house (or place or country); and, third, the importance of like-minded listeners. Musical sociability is in some respects tribal; it involves exclusion as well as inclusion (and a good music scene reflects this).

My final proposition is this: **most people who make music don't make a living from making music.**

There are two different issues here. On the one hand, many musicians who have highly developed craft skills (and provide a range of musical services) still have to do other things to sustain themselves and their families, whether routinely or at different moments in their careers. On the other hand, much music making is done by amateurs, for love rather than money, though often in ways that make their own contribution to the music economy. In Britain the most obvious example of this is choirs—every town has an amateur choir and/or choral society, every city has

numerous choirs and choral societies, many of which have been going for a hundred years or more. Annual choir concerts more often than not involve paying professional soloists and accompanying instrumental performers.

The point here is that what we might mean by a flourishing music culture is not necessarily measurable in terms of musical earnings or employment. Or, to put this another way, musical employment and earnings depend on a music ecology that is not based in a music economy.

What are the consequences of the situation I have been describing?

First, that although, on the whole, musicians can look after themselves—music will happen whatever policy makers do—the conditions for music making and listening can be more or less frustrating. For example, many of the policies that most effect music making are not music policies, but concern planning, transport, education, social welfare, alcohol licensing, health and safety, noise and crowd control, smoking, etc. In cities, in particular, musicians are often most frustrated by the unexpected consequences of urban policies that take no account of music at all.

In economic terms we need to understand music as a service industry rather than as a form of commodity (or rights) production. For musicians, that is, a healthy—regenerated—environment will be one in which a variety of people will want (and will be able to play decently for) a variety of musical services; the issue for most musicians is not employment as such.

The second general consequence of my propositions is that the music market is both a good and bad thing. It provides dynamism for musical creativity and acts as a useful form of communication between musicians and their audiences, but it is inevitably (because of the logic of competition) more concerned with the construction of a mainstream than with musical margins and is therefore essentially a conservative force. One crucial aspect of a healthy local music ecology is that new entrants (with new ideas, constructing new audiences) should have the space and time to get established. This is where public funding and resources can be significant. What is unnecessary is for the state to act as a kind of ersatz music business—its role is to support entrepreneurs, not to be entrepreneurial.

The third consequence of my arguments here is that we have to understand that, in important respects, music making and listening are essentially irrational activities, they concern emotions and are driven by enthusiasms. Music is not made by the rational economic individual fantasised by market theorists; musical experience is not conducive to rational or bureaucratic planning, to auditing, measuring, etc. And this is the key to understanding music's *social* value—as a source of happiness, fellow feeling, exhilaration, etc., yes, but also as a source of irritation (noise!), aggression, social distinction, etc. It is a great mistake to think that music is just a good thing!

But I will conclude on a more rational note. In thinking about music and regeneration during the rest of the Forum you should keep two questions in mind:

What is good music for a country, region or city? What is a good country, region or city for music?

My own belief is that the answers to these questions are rooted in issues of geography, sociology and social psychology rather than economics. A flourishing local musical economy is certainly a sign of a healthy musical culture, but creating a healthy musical culture is not simply an economic matter.

Simon Frith

University of Edinburgh