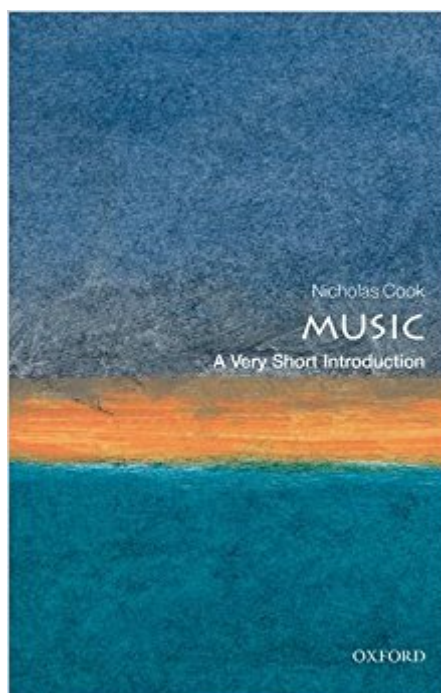


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Music: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

What is music? How is it constructed? How is it consumed? Why do you enjoy it at all? In *Music: A Very Short Introduction*, Nicholas Cook invites us to really think about music and the role it plays in our lives and our ears. Drawing on a number of accessible examples, the author prompts us to call on our own musical experiences in order to think more critically about the roles of the performers and the listener, about music as a commodity and an experience, what it means to understand music, and the values we ascribe to it. This very short introduction, written with both humor and flair, begins with a sampling of music as human activity and then goes on to consider the slippery phenomenon of how music has become an object of thought. Covering not only Western and classical music, Cook touches on all types from rock to Indonesian music and beyond. Incorporating musical forms from every continent, *Music* will make enjoyable reading for beginner and expert alike. About the Series: Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, *Very Short Introductions* offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam.

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Customer Reviews

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As introductory texts go, there is little in Cook's book that makes music easy. Indeed, it is as if Cook wants to disabuse the student in an introductory music course and the seasoned music scholar alike from assuming that there is anything easy about music -- easy to understand, easy to listen to,

easy to talk about. Cook's strategy, however, is not to complicate music by making it inaccessible, but rather to suggest a series of strategies that allow the reader to draw closer to music by making conscious decisions about music's meanings. Thinking about music is an act of arrogating music to something other than the familiar. In the early chapters of the book the arrogation of music to thought will surely strike some readers, especially ethnomusicologists, as arrogant. The reader, however, would be wise to withhold judgment and give the entire book a chance. Rather than arrogance, it is optimism that drives Cook to think and rethink music, and in so doing, to connect and reconnect the fragments of de-familiarized music to the familiar world. In the book's opening chapters, Cook asks us to think again -- and differently -- about some of the most common tropes of late 20th-century musical scholarship. He takes the concept of "authenticity," rendered so threadbare by the early-music and folk-music revivals, and applies it to areas that musical scholars of all types tend to privilege -- popular music and commercial music. In these musics, which are so much a part of our everyday and hence of our experience of ourselves, authenticity is present because it must be. It's not about good music or bad music, great music or trivial music, but about how the music empowers us with interpretive strategies to grapple with decisions about the most crucial issues in our own lives and in the collective lives of our society. The most complex arguments in the book concern the ways in which music is given meaning through the human acts of constructing meaning. There is a strong Western aesthetic core to Cook's basic arguments. De-familiarized as it becomes, music nonetheless remains Western. The historical and modern crises to which Cook addresses himself in certain chapters (notably Chapter 3, "A State of Crisis?", and Chapter 6, "Music and the Academy") lead Cook to ask a number of crucial ontological questions: Is music an object? Are there palpable images that possess sufficient numbers of metaphors, which in turn make it possible to construct meaning? To what extent is music an "act," something that composers, performers, listeners, and thinkers about music share? The value of these questions is in the asking, and it's in the asking that the music becomes at once very serious business and a lot of fun. One question that the readers of the world of music will undoubtedly ask is, Just which "music" is being introduced by this book? Cook bends over backwards to be fair to non-Western musics, world musics, and the musics of limitless others, and he persistently tries to address ethnomusicological issues. Still, music in this book remains fundamentally that which is able to be represented as "a work," inasmuch as works dominate a metaphysics of music embedded in a dialectics of thinking and performing. As a work, music necessarily possesses weight, and some source of gravity must pull the work toward it. That source is Western music, and to some degree even Western art music. Cook provides a thick description and ethnographic

reading of music in Western Culture. His constant interpolation of the variety of musical experience, moreover, is an ethnography of a specific place and time: Western culture as constructed from the history of the West. Cook argues, often quite convincingly, that at any time we engage ourselves with music, individually and collectively as a group of scholars or a community with shared culture, we recognize the potential of making any music our own. Such assertions lead Cook to make his passionate case for an optimism that allows us to engage with new, different, and foreign musics, an optimism predicated on the possibilities of familiarity. If we begin to rethink music as creating meaning rather than simply representing it, we have the basis of an optimistic musicology (p. 129). One may find oneself ill at ease when told essentially that music is whatever we think it is and that its meanings reveal themselves when one engages in a performative act of criticism. After thinking a great deal about music, I'm hardly less ill at ease myself. The case for thinking as the basis for determining musical meaning unsettles because it is difficult to accept that music is about thinking rather than about creating objects, performing objects, and perceiving objects. In "Music: A Very Short Introduction", it unsettles furthermore because we want introductions to tell us and our students what music is and how to become comfortable with its familiar sounds, not to tell us that we all go about experiencing it in different ways. One thing is certain, however: after reading Nicholas Cook's very short introduction to music, music is unlikely to be what most readers previously thought it was.

Another book which I ordered as a text for my music degree and found to be a fascinating read. He sure packs a lot into a small parcel!

This is not an introduction to music in any kind of real sense. There is no objectivity here. Perhaps you're interested in reading one man's rant about all things music, but I was not.

While I very much enjoy the Oxford "Very Short Introductions" series and use several in various classes I teach, Nicholas Cook's *MUSIC* is an anomaly. While the self-possessed highly opinionated author exudes much professed condescending erudition about the history and nature of music, much of what he says is factually wrong and many of his unsupported interpretive conjectures about the nature of music are pure nonsense. For example, classical music does not begin and end with Beethoven as the author suggests (24-29). The assertion that "in Beethoven's time" and right through the 18th and 19th centuries, "the only music you could hear was live

Music is an agent of ideology: we must not just hear it, but "read" it as an intrinsic part of the society and culture that produces it. Until the second part of XX century mostly studied in conservatories, not universities as musicology. Does music need words? Can it be read without words? Yes, though a few words can help set the context. Beethoven is a recurring reference for the author. He did not just revolutionize music, he had something to say about the decay of aristocratic Europe. He never wanted a fixed, salaried position: he wanted to write the music he wanted to write, when he wanted, if he wanted. Cook argues this was the opposite of Rossini, who thrived in that Europe of pomp and ostentatious luxury. Others would disagree: Rossini mocked the rich and the noble in his operas, just look at the *Barbiere di Siviglia*, where everyone is a crook. Mass production of records, now internet streaming: talk about music as you talk about cuisine: everything is available everywhere. Also, the average technical quality of musicians is on the rise, musicians face harder competition to emerge. This is indeed a very very short introduction to music, but a useful one to stimulate interest especially for those who maybe listened to music but never thought about it, and never "read" it!

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