
Max M. Richter’s *Musical worlds in Yogyakarta* is one of the few extensive ethnographic studies about music in Indonesia. Applying Pierre Bourdieu’s theories on class, gender, and nation with the author’s alternative perspectives of inter-group social capital, physicality, and grounded cosmopolitanism, the book examines musical performances in public contexts in Yogyakarta, ranging from street and neighborhood performances to commercial venues and state environments such as the Sultan’s palace, universities, the regional parliament, and military institutions. During his field research, conducted from April to October 2001 in Yogyakarta, a ‘student town’, and one of central Java’s most touristic and ethnically heterogeneous areas, the author closely observed and often actively participated in various kinds of musical activities, from street-corner jam sessions to large-scale concerts which performed different genres, including local and Western songs.

Besides the introduction and conclusion, the book includes three parts that consist of eight chapters. Part One (Chapters 1-3) focuses on the musical tastes and practices of street based workers and examines how these have influenced the connections and boundaries among and between the workers. In Chapter 1, the author explores the musical activities of diverse groups in Yogyakarta’s most touristic district of Sosrowijayan. By participating actively in the daily life of such groups like becak drivers and street guides during his field research, Richter explores how the social relations of the street worker groups and their capital conversion strategies have influenced and been affected by their different musical tastes. In Chapter 2, the author explores two main public spaces and forms of making music that are daily occurrences in Sosrowijayan: the mobile buskers (*pengamen*) and the street-worker hangouts (*tongkrongan*). He discusses how individual and cultural expression play roles in both kinds of music making. He looks at how the *pengamen* and *tongkrongan* are different in terms of their social affiliations, their musical interests, and their relation to monetary exchange (p. 53). Chapter 3 looks at the features, participants, and the socio-cultural significance of the musical activities of two Sosrowijayan-based musical
groups: the Sekar Wuyung group’s musical repertoire alternates between campursari and dangdut Jawa, while Shower Bands mostly folk songs and popular American music.

In Part Two (Chapters 4 and 5), Richter analyses physical expressions at music events in neighborhoods and commercial venues by introducing Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus in order to show how gender and class differentiations are reflected in and influence these settings. Paraphrasing Bourdieu Richter writes, ‘habitus conveys the idea that people’s disposition and habituated physical movements are products of their structured social world’ and further notes that the concept ‘helps to link musical performance to everyday gendered relations’ (p. 84). An important term the author uses to elaborate on habitus is ‘musical physicalisation’, which refers to ‘any bodily movement that occurs through music’. This is primarily manifested in three forms: ‘detachment engagement’, which refers to ‘behaviors around music that proceed from complete physical immobility to active but still relatively understated engagement, and finally back to disengagement’; ‘other worlds’, which refers to ‘highly physicalised dance and/or related bodily movements that indicate a person’s or groups’ attempted or actual entrance into another consciousness or alternative state of being; and ‘sexualisation’, which refers to ‘the physical movements at musical performances that individuals more or less explicitly model on sexual intercourse’ (pp. 85-7). The former is elaborated in Chapter 4, while the last two are extensively discussed in Chapter 5.

Part Three (Chapters 6, 7, and 8) discusses musical performances at state institutions. Applying Bourdieu’s concept of a bureaucratic field, the author explores live musical performances in the Regional Parliament (discussed in Chapter 6), the armed forces (examined in Chapter 7), and universities (explored in Chapter 8), in order to construct links between music, social identity and power for maintaining peaceful inter-group relations in Yogyakarta. The author ends this book with a discussion of musical performances of campursari and jalanan at Yogyakarta Sultan’s palace.

When written texts, including scholarly works, are a representation of reality, then they can have a psychological affect on the readers’ perception of what is real. I have read with adoration some Western historical and ethnographical studies about Indonesian music, such as Jeremy Wallach’s Modern noise and fluid genres (2008), Andy Hicken’s ‘Slankers Tongkonan
The poor life of marginal communities described in this book has captured my attention more than the description of the (genres of) music they played. The scholarly narrative of this book brings to life for me the appalling effects of global capitalism and modern tourism on my home country. It makes me understand more clearly the dark side of Yogyakarta which I know only vaguely based only on my few visits to the city. The book provides ‘naked’ descriptions of the deprived life habits of Yogyakarta’s marginal low class communities who struggle to get by, often addicted to tobacco, drugs, and alcoholic drinks, while practicing free sex and imitating the lifestyle of Western backpackers. Among these marginalized people are the perek. (The author uses this term frequently in this book without showing cultural sensitivity. Perek is a pejorative term that refers impolitely to women who primarily provide sexual favours to Western men in order to earn dollars and euros). Richter also discusses others including the gigolo, preman, and pengamen, who love beer, vodka, local wine beram hitam, and other intoxicating beverages from the ‘series of gallon-seized alcoholic drink dispensers while enjoying music’ (p. 90). As far as I know, the lyrics of the songs sung by these types of marginalized people are predominately critical and urge resistance against the established parties and ruling classes. Such sounds of protest were familiar to the daily public transport users in Indonesia where the pengamen groups have been busking for years. Most of them love to sing songs with lyrics containing social and political criticism such as Iwan Fals’ ‘Bongkar’ and ‘Bento’ or Slank’s ‘Seperti para koruptor’.

What I want to say is that for marginal groups in Indonesia’s urban places, music functions as a means to forget the suffering of life. In this regard, I would agree with the author that every social group has its own unique identity associated with music. It is not only a steady symbol of group identity, but it can also function as an identity marker. This reminds us of Jeremy Wallach’s notion that ‘popular culture, pop music in particular, is an important site of cultural [and social] struggle’ (Wallach 2008:4). Therefore, music is often used to affirm a groups’ discrepancies rather than their similarities, which seems to contradict one of the author’s main arguments that
different communities of Yogyakartans make use of music in order to negotiate issues of power and promote peace.

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References

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