

Book Review

Speak it Louder: Asian Americans Making Music

Deborah Wong
New York and London: Routledge, 2004.
ISBN: 0415970407
388 pages plus audio companion CD

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Lately, I've been thinking a lot about the problem of methodology in interdisciplinary studies of music. The problem is how best to bring multiple (and critical) disciplinary perspectives to bear on specific musical sites while maintaining a commitment to reflexive scholarship and endeavoring not to throw the baby (music) out with the (cold grey formalist) bathwater. In *Speak it Louder: Asian Americans Making Music*, Deborah Wong tackles this daunting problem head-on, and to a very large extent she succeeds in providing a model for responsible socio-musical ethnography. This is a wide-ranging book that brings together Wong's commitment to ethnography and her concern with the social and political construction of Asian American identities through music. Along the way she discusses diverse musical case studies, always carefully situated and contextualized within the United States: Laotian song, Cambodian music drama, karaoke, Vietnamese pop, Japanese American taiko, Asian American hip hop, Asian American listeners, and Asian American improvisational music. Given the context of this book review, I'll concentrate on Wong's extensive discussion of improvisation. Along the way, I'll refer the reader to the special issue of *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation* on Asian Improvisation (1.3), which contains several articles and interviews that amplify Wong's analyses.

Wong's approach to ethnography is heavily influenced by feminist theories of performativity. She defines ethnography as "a broad body of scholarship that addresses the work of culture as performance and the mechanism of this as the performative" (5). Importantly, for her approach to musical analysis, "the performative is a consequence of performance: performance constructs new critical realities and the operationalization of the process of performance is key to this" (5). In other words, Wong understands musical performance as a form of cultural work that has the potential to articulate and affect identity politics, especially within the arena of interethnic contact. Judith Butler's landmark work on gender, sexuality and (latterly) race is key to Wong's approach. Indeed, it is Butler's move from theorizing the social construction of gender to that of race that is most attractive for Wong, since it allows her to understand the body as a site for the discursive and material construction of race (165), and to examine how "Asian Americans imbricate agency and rewriting through their engagement with music" (6). Her work belongs to a growing body of feminist ethnomusicology including, most notably, Diamond and Moisala (2000), but it is also heavily indebted to the cultural musicology of Robert Walser and Susan McClary.

In Chapter 8 "The Asian American Body in Performance," Wong addresses the racialization of the body in Asian American jazz, by pointing to discourse that positions jazz (within an American context) as a struggle between White and Black (for example White critics/Black musicians): "The long history of Other colors in jazz – that is Asians and Latinos – is consistently refigured as absence" (171). In the mid 1970s, San Francisco Bay Area musicians such as Mark Izu, Jon Jang, Francis Wong, Glenn Horiuchi, Anthony Brown, Fred Ho and (later) Miya Masaoka, formed an activist community of Asian American improvisers who have

asserted the presence of Asian Americans in jazz discourse, while acknowledging their debt to the Chicago-based Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians.¹ Wong argues that these musicians are primarily interested in free improvisation as a model of coalition politics. “They are clearly committed to the idea of Asian American music, but in the end this music always emerged relationally—either between musicians in performance, or in terms of ethnic and racial bridge building, i.e. the histories behind the bodies that produce it” (277).

As an illustration of this point, Chapter 12 “ImprovAsians: Free Improvisation as Asian American Resistance,” describes productive interethnic encounters between Asian American and African American improvisers including Miya Masaoka with George Lewis, and Joseph Jarman’s mid-90s work with Glenn Horiuchi and Francis Wong. In counterbalance, institutional and racial tensions between Asian American musicians and African American organizers come to the surface in her discussion of the representation of Asian American improvisers within the San Francisco Jazz Festival in Chapter 13 “Ethnography, Ethnomusicology, and Post-White Theory.” Throughout, the words and music of improvisers are carefully foregrounded. Wong pays serious attention to the performativity of free improvised music in her close reading of a performance by Glenn Horiuchi and Francis Wong, and she carefully theorizes and then demonstrates the role of musicians as public intellectuals.

Taken together, Wong’s analyses of Asian American improvisers in the contexts of performances, institutions, recording, academia, and political activism reveal a complex arena that begs for its own book-length study. Because improvisation is only one of her foci, her descriptions sometimes feel frustratingly brief. We are told that Bay Area Asian American improvisers “try to shake up racialized and racist social structures through a variety of activities, but the connecting thread is an effort to use performance as a force in social transformation” (173), yet the evidence for this large claim is only sketched. Of course, not all Asian American improvisers are activists (put another way, improvisation’s political and social effects are not always present at the level of intention). The histories and practice of musicians inhabiting diverse geographic, ethnic, and class positions need to be taken into account. For example, interviews between Vijay Iyer and Rudresh Mahanthappa, and between Miya Masaoka and Keiko Uenishi in *CSI/ÉCI*’s special issue on Asian Improvisation articulate complex intersections of ethnicity, age, class, and technology. In the same issue, Wong’s more recent work on improvisation and taiko points towards her ongoing commitment to meticulous analyses of performances by improvising musicians.

Throughout the book, Wong maintains a consistently reflexive stance; her personal and scholarly integrity speaks loudly through clear and persuasive prose. On one level, *Speak it Louder* may be read as one scholar/musician’s journey through music, theory, and methodology. Wong moves skillfully among a number of discursive self-representations: student, teacher, scholar, musician, fan, and even daughter (the useful accompanying CD contains a moving excerpt from Wong’s interview with her own father). Indeed, the only blind spot comes from her declared focus on the “American” context. All roads lead from points East into an “America” that then becomes a closed unit, a self-sufficient field; there are no return routes, no consideration of the relationship between the United States and other contemporary cultural spheres.² The imaginary of “America” is represented as a given, no explanation necessary—and this is a surprising exclusion in such a carefully researched and self-conscious piece of scholarship. That quibble aside, *Speak it Louder* is an impressive interdisciplinary study that ought to make ethnomusicologists sit up and listen.

Notes

¹ See Dessen for a history of the Asian American Creative Music Movement, and its connection with the AACM.

² Wong's book may also be seen as a (particularly intelligent) contribution to a larger academic trend towards understanding music in the United States in terms of a collection of more or less discrete ethnic 'area studies'. See Koskoff, Shelemay.

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