

## Book Review

Fabian Holt and Antti-Ville Kärjä, eds. 2017. *The Oxford Handbook of Popular Music in the Nordic Countries*. New York: Oxford University Press. 432 pp. ISBN 9780190603908 (hbk)

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**Keywords:** music history; popular culture; globalization; nationalism; cosmopolitanism; nature

This impressive collection is both timely and important. Its mere existence makes it clear that the popular music of the Nordic countries warrants an all-encompassing study from the fields of musicology, social sciences, cultural studies and the like. I will say right out of the bat that the book is a successful one, and the key to its success is its theoretical point of departure, more of which later. It will without a doubt prove to be a handy tool for further research in the region in the coming years.

The book has its roots in a collaborative project started by its editors in 2011, ushering in academics along with personnel from Nordic musical institutions and media. As Holt makes abundantly evident in his well-written and clear introduction, this book does NOT contain a selection of articles detailing various aspects of musical activities in the countries it covers but rather a “collective account of popular music’s significance in processes of cultural globalization in transnational regions” (3). The focus is mainly on the Nordic countries’ relationship with the “outside world” from a musical point of view, especially its often sensitive relationship with the Anglo-American pop world and its hegemonial cultural standing. This is reflected in the chapter titles (e.g., “From the Faroes to the World Stage”, “Christian Metal and the Translocal North”, “Urban Music and the Complex Identities of ‘New Nationals’ in Scandinavia”). The editors also attempt to steer away from, and challenge, narratives that have long prevailed among scholars interested in Nordic music, namely, simplified, almost fan-driven writings that emphasize nature and mythical images of a dreamt-up Nordicism. In this reviewer’s experience, this is especially true for academics who are not from the region, and this book is sadly not exempt from this (see Tony Mitchell’s superficial and “tired” chapter, “Music and Landscape in Iceland”). But I have to

congratulate Holt at the same time for being quite aware of the book's limitations. For instance, I like his description of the meeting between different factions working within the music field (scholars, journalists, museum curators) and the perceived gap between them and therefore lack of cooperation (and a borderline animosity as well). Having an experience in all of these fields, I can confirm this situation, more or less. Holt also rightfully bemoans the lack of interest from national broadcasting corporations when he tried to establish a shared Nordic platform in programming, making usage of the material here. My experience so far in researching and working in the Nordic popular music environment (as a jury member in the by:Larm Nordic Music Prize, for instance) has also showed me the surprising lack of dialogue between nations that still belong to a "institutionalized" region, to use Holt's terminology. For instance, knowledge and interest in Greenlandic music in Iceland is almost non-existent, and pretty much the same can be said about the Faroese Islands, although big stars like Eivör are an exception.

This book is divided into three sections, or "cultural dimensions"—geography, history and identity. There is a logical progression here that works well, moving from the macro to the micro and carrying out the stated aim of the book: to delve into a holistic study of musical life in a transnational region rather than offering single-authored accounts of specific scenes and time periods. A sort of cultural geography mapping is laid out at the beginning, then moving into the location of the music activities, "the music's place within local and global histories and in the temporal dimensions of cultural consciousness" (11). The third and final section deals with identity making, looking at the individuals and "forms of collective belonging, expression and positioning" (13).

I am not going to give a mini-review of each and every chapter, but I will briefly mention those that best adhered to the given mission statement. The respected American ethnomusicologist Philip V. Bohlman contributes the very first chapter, where he puts the term "borealism" (pioneered by the Icelandic folklorist Kristinn Schram and derived from Edward Said's concept of Orientalism) into a refreshing, no, challenging light. Joshua Green's account of the Faroe Islands is a fine and respectful study, and you sense that Green went headlong into the project. As I said earlier, Holt recognizes the book's inherent shortcomings, as with that of selecting contributors, where full balance is unachievable. There are, for instance, three chapters on Iceland, all of them by scholars outside of Scandinavia (an American, an Australian and an Englishwoman). These chapters are fine (bar the Mitchell one) but, of course, it would have been nice to see a contribution from a local. Yet I know for a fact that there simply wasn't an Icelandic scholar working on popular music studies at a higher level when the project was started. This is

thankfully changing now. Come the second section, I enjoyed Pekka Suutaris's lively chapter on the musical revival in the Finnish-Russian border region of Karelia, putting that development neatly in connection with general identity politics in Eastern Europe and various struggles for those seeking to claim their national identity in the face of threats and bureaucratic assimilationist tactics. Jan Sverre Knudsen's chapter about music played at the memorial ceremony following the 2011 Utoya massacre is a micro-analysis and good example of the current research that can be found here. In the third section, "Identity", there are a couple of chapters on the immigrant situation in Scandinavia (Alexandra D'Urso and Henrik Marstal) and how immigrants are using hip hop and underground music to forge a place, space and identity, often at loggerheads with current and accepted strands. Benjamin R. Teitelbaum offers a great and insightful chapter on radical white nationalism, using ethnomusicology and race studies. Finally, I have to mention Holt's chapter (not the Introduction). In "Nordic Modernity and the Musical Landscape" he, among other things, criticizes the idea of "Nordic Cool" which favours Anglo idioms above all else and is both white and hegemonic, often catering to the market's ideas about Nordicness, and thus excluding music that is made by immigrants, minority groups or even established, "normal" pop/rockers who do not fit into the narrow concept of "Nordic Cool". Holt's writing is among many here that actively tries to challenge accepted normative ideas about music in the Nordic region and it is simply refreshing.

All in all, it is a wide-ranging book, but more or less within the scope promised in the Introduction. The writing naturally varies between chapters but, at the same time, editorial and production values are strong and consistent throughout: my hardback copy is the very model of a hefty and important volume. Its authority is smartly balanced with a colour photo of Icelandic pop/rock CDs (taken inside the world-famous 12 Tónar record store in Reykjavik) and I would be lying if this didn't make my national pride swell a little, or rather, boil like molten lava. Maybe it is an amusing proof of what Holt talks about in his Introduction, that nationalistic sentiments in the various Nordic countries tend to override notions of shared interest and outlook—making the region's transglobal qualities often difficult to decipher. The authors nonetheless venture bravely into that dark and mystical forest and often come up with well-founded and illuminating results.