Review

Ewa Mazierska, *Popular Viennese Electronic Music, 1990–2015*. London and New York: Routledge, 2019. 239 pp. ISBN 978-1-138-71391-8 (hbk).

Reviewed by: Giacomo Bottà, University of Helsinki, Finland
giacomo.botta@helsinki.fi

Keywords: Vienna; electronic music; Austria; cultural history

For a very brief period, which corresponds more or less to the last decade of the twentieth century, popular music was able to circulate across national borders in some kind of equal exchange among European nations. This was partly due to MTV Europe, which started broadcasting in 1987 as a pan-European and sometimes multilingual TV station. Bands and scenes reached outside the usual national boundaries and for a while Reykjavík, Brussels and Helsinki became as exciting as Liverpool, Los Angeles and London.

It was especially idiosyncratic to see established capitals of classical music becoming homes to exciting contemporary acts and scenes, which seemed not to bother about their high culture heritage. Moreover, smaller 'peripheral' nations competed in the pan-European league, exploiting or exploited by their exoticism and not being overshadowed by bigger, more powerful nations. In this context, the Austrian capital of Vienna stood out significantly, as home to an electronic music scene, which provided cosy and laid-back beats to dance floors across the globe.

With this in mind, it is significant to read a monograph which takes popular Viennese electronic music as its main subject. There is a steadily growing literature about place and music, which often takes electronic music into account (see for instance Lashua, Spracklen and Wagg 2014; Lashua, Wagg, Spracklen and Yavuz 2019), and several books and articles dig into Austrian popular music (for example, Ahlers and Jacke 2017; Reitsamer and Prokop 2017). However, in this volume, the city is not at stake, but rather music and its cultural history in a well-defined era, from 1990 to 2015. Following the introduction, *Popular Viennese Electronic Music, 1990–2015* is divided into three parts. The first part takes up the task of measuring and defining the city's musical heritage and its trajectory across the classical/popular apparent divide; 'from Mozart to Conchita Wurst'. The author attempts to make sense of Vienna as a capital of music, exploring this in time through an

historical overview and not only in reference to 'new music'. Mazierska succeeds in this by telling of Viennese classicism (Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert), its institutions and its cosmopolitan ambition to make (and sell) music universally. Romanticism is handled through the work of the Strauss family and the modernization of the city, which had a certain influence on its soundscape, whilst the inter-war period sees the resizing of the country and its later incorporation into Nazi Germany, with Vienna frozen into a mythical past. The period after World War II is handled in all its complexity, with individual figures such as Falco and Conchita Wurst being useful fixtures, exemplifying the renegotiation of national and individual identities, musical imperialism, the ethno-nationalization of popular music, cosmopolitanism and immigration.

However, it must be noted that the imperial, national and local scales overlap and sometimes are taken for granted in their shaping of Viennese music. It would have been interesting to read more about the Austrian 'post-colonial' dimension, in relation to the eastern alpine regions and their musical expressions outside the current Austrian borders.

The second part focuses its attention on the main theme of the book: 'Vienna Electronica' (programmatically used as a synonym to the 'popular Viennese electronic music' of the title) from the perspective of scene and industry. The author links the existence of an electronic music scene in Vienna to previous subcultures (such as punk and hip hop), to heritage-bound cosmopolitanism and experimentation and to a network of clubs, labels and fans. Hidden in the chapters of this second part are also several references to Austrian welfare, environmental consciousness and social egalitarianism, which created a stimulating and healthy melting pot in Vienna.

The third part of the book analyses this specific musical experience in seven chapters, dedicated to individual artists (such as Kruder & Dorfmeister and Sofa Surfers) and labels (such as Mego), with a final chapter which specifically addresses the contribution of women. The author notes that these chapters are based on interviews, although she doesn't use direct quotes, preferring to build self-enclosed and compact individual histories and careers.

Despite hermeneutics being marginalized in popular music studies, the author decides to analyse albums, album design, individual songs and videos in their visual, textual and sonic dimension. This choice shows that dealing critically with musical meanings and with their interpretation is indeed fruitful. This becomes overt when Mazierska, for instance, focuses on lyrics, probably the most overlooked aspect of electronic music-making.

The most interesting musical acts in the book are to be found at the end: Electric Indigo and Sweet Susie. Apart from their musical merits, the first artist launched

'Female Pressure', a database of female DJs, music producers and event organizers; and the second produced *Gemeindebautöne*, a community project involving inhabitants of a housing estate in a performance about neoliberalism. Both artists also remixed male white Viennese classics, working on material by Haydn and Mozart respectively.

Sometimes missing in the book is a more nuanced engagement with the city itself. We are left wondering about the socio-spatial communities, where some artists were born or where they developed and what living in Vienna meant and means to them. The book wisely follows the phenomenon to 2015, revealing the long threads, the shift caused by the streaming of digitalized music, and the revived career of some individual acts (such as Kruder & Dorfmeister, currently touring clubs across Europe) after the 1990s heyday. Yet, ultimately, the book makes for an interesting and well-packed contribution to urban popular music studies, and it is able to show the 1990s as an incredible creative momentum for popular music in Vienna and in other European 'peripheries'. As the author asks on the last page: 'were electronic musicians in countries such as Belgium, Poland or Hungary as lucky in this period as their Austrian counterparts?' (p. 218). This is a call we should definitely try to answer.

References

- Ahlers, Michael, and Christophe Jacke. 2017. *Perspectives on German Popular Music*. London and New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315600208>
- Lashua, Brett, Karl Spracklen and Stephen Wagg. 2014. *Sounds and the City: Popular Music, Place and Globalization*. London, New York and Shanghai: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137283115>
- Lashua, Brett, Stephen Wagg, Karl Spracklen and M. Selim Yavuz. 2019. *Sounds and the City Volume 2*. London, New York and Shanghai: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-94081-6>
- Reitsamer, Rosa, and Rainer Prokop. 2017. 'Keepin' it Real in Central Europe: The DIY Rap Music Careers of Male Hip Hop Artists in Austria'. *Cultural Sociology* 12/2: 193–207. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975517694299>