

***The Hallelujah Effect: Philosophical Reflections on Music, Performance Practice, and Technology.*** By Babette Babich. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2013. xv, 307 pp. ISBN 978-1-4094-4960-7.

Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" is a song with an unusual and complicated performance history. Whereas the initial recording by Cohen in 1984 was largely ignored and little known, many subsequent cover recordings by different artists have achieved high levels of critical and popular success and are often assumed to be the authentic original versions. Many listeners even hold special connections to these cover versions that define their understanding of the song. For me, it is the haunting performance by Jeff Buckley on his 1994 album *Grace*. For my eight-year-old daughter, it is the version of the song by Rufus Wainwright on the 2001 soundtrack album from the movie *Shrek*. For many Canadians, it is the riveting live performances by k.d. lang at the Canadian Juno Awards in 2005, the Canadian Songwriters Hall of Fame ceremony in 2006 at which Cohen was inducted, or the opening ceremonies of the Winter Olympics in Vancouver in 2010. For Babette Babich, the defining moment came during a game of what she calls YouTube poker on Facebook: in response to a friend's enthusiasm for the *Shrek* "Hallelujah," Babich "saw her Rufus Wainwright post and raised it by a k.d. lang" (25). Even though Babich was aware of Cohen's original version, the exchange prompted her to explore her response to the performance by lang, the working efficacy of media access and its ability to separate the song from the author, and the breadth of influence of the original that works backwards and forwards on other versions. In turn, this initiated her meditation on the nature of music in the context of today's network culture, a phenomenon she identifies as the Hallelujah effect.

Although the title of the book is taken from a song by Leonard Cohen with a specific performance by k.d. lang as a defining event, Babich's focus is not on popular music. She admits that she is "less a pop music fan than many others" and places herself "on the low end of the scale" in terms of her knowledge of this music (22). Instead, it is ultimately a book on music and philosophy in which Babich uses lang's performance of Cohen's song to extend her philosophical considerations into other areas.

The organization falls into three main divisions separated by interludes. The first division addresses Cohen's song, its rise to popularity through the various channels of social media, and the way k.d. lang comes to represent its living embodiment through the dramatic realization of her performances. Babich considers various performance practices to explore issues of voice,



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gender, and sexuality as Cohen's expression of male desire is reinterpreted through the subversive eroticism of lang's lesbianism. From here Babich turns, in the second division, to Adorno's account of the culture industry as it is experienced through modern technological mediation. This allows her to shift Adorno's theories of reproduction from radio broadcasts to the modern equivalent in social media. In the final division, Babich concludes with Nietzsche's writings on music, the nature of tragedy, and Beethoven in order to reflect on the meaning of music between antiquity and the present day. As Babich explains, "it is Nietzsche's extraordinary and complex conception of the becoming-human of dissonance that drives this exploration of the Hallelujah effect" (16).

It should be apparent from the above summary that this is an ambitious book. Babich connects, by way of Nietzsche and Adorno, the ideals of ancient Greek tragedy and the practices of music or *mousiké techné* to a performance of a Leonard Cohen song by k.d. lang as mediated through social media. She draws on a dizzying array of analytical disciplines that include gender and cultural studies, sociology, musicology, music theory, phenomenology, acoustics, semiotics, and, of course, a rich range of philosophical approaches. Given this broad scope, one wonders at the audience for the book. As Babich concedes, "readers whose interests do not run to Nietzsche's musings about the archaic 'spirit of music' (and its relation to the tragic work of art, ancient and modern) may and will certainly leave off reading in advance of the movement of this book to its third division" (15).

Overall, this is a thought-provoking book that seeks to understand our current media culture within a philosophical context. Babich's observations and conclusions are compelling, but the book is not without difficulties. These "philosophical reflections" include personal remarks and opinions, many detours, and loose threads that are not always drawn together. The writing is often entertaining but it is seldom straightforward. Babich refers forwards and backwards throughout the book, and tangential lines of thinking often continue into the lengthy footnotes. One must read with a fair amount of agility just to follow her arguments. Another difficulty is that Babich shifts effortlessly and often among disciplines and intellectual approaches. To follow and appreciate the discourse fully requires a rigorous intellectual background covering popular culture, gender and sexuality studies, various strands of philosophy, and a basic understanding of music theory. Specialists who are deeply interested in the topic—not just Leonard Cohen and k.d. lang, but the role of their performances in expressing meaning in music—will find this an engaging and rewarding book. I suspect that for many others, it will be a daunting experience.

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