



Book review

Zaborowski, R. (2023). *Music generations in the Digital Age: Social practices of listening and idols in Japan*. Amsterdam University Press. 226 pp. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.11634944>

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Rafal Zaborowski's *Music generations in the Digital Age: Social practices of listening and idols in Japan* offers a deep dive into the multifaceted world of music listening practices by developing unique insights into Japanese music culture while shedding an exciting new light on central questions around audiences and music consumption. Situated at the theoretical juncture between media studies, cultural studies, and music studies, Zaborowski goes beyond merely textual understandings of music and instead examines music listening as a deeply social and embedded practice shaped by generational identities, cultural contexts, and technological changes. Drawing on an impressive scope of fieldwork in Japan's Aichi prefecture and Tokyo, Zaborowski combines many years of ethnographic research, questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups to unpack how people's various engagements with music present sites of meaning-making and identity work. In so doing, the book gives new importance to traditional approaches in cultural consumption and audience research (such as uses and gratification, encoding/decoding, or the circuit of culture model), as mainly rooted in media and cultural studies, and probes their analytical value for the study of music listening in and beyond the Japanese context. The book consists of five chapters, framed by an introduction and a conclusion.

In Chapter 1, Zaborowski works through the key scholarly debates of the book and opens up insightful conversations between audience and music studies. Most notably, by putting forth the notion of "social practices of listening" (pp. 64–66), Zaborowski argues that

to understand the relevance of music in everyday life, we need to observe a whole range of music-related practices, in some of which the focus is not on the music at all. Social practices of listening can be general or personal and are not only about listening or only about music – but about how listening and music are integrated and interpreted in social and cultural life. (p. 180)

Indeed, guided by the central question of "how people's practices of music listening are situated in their social and cultural lives" (p. 27), Zaborowski foregrounds the deeply embedded nature of his data throughout the book. This allows him to bring to light the various ways in which people construct meaning with and through their diverse forms of music consumption with great nuance and contextual sen-

sitivity, thus simultaneously countering “the uneven media representations of Japanese culture” (p. 63) that frequently circulate in European popular culture and media.

In Chapter 2, titled “Listening and Listeners”, Zaborowski then introduces five in-depth listener profiles to draw out how people’s diverse musical practices and usages, including forms of mood management, connecting, or identity formation, are instilled with meaning through the interaction between the musical text and the broader everyday cultural and social context of the listener – precisely situated “in the act of practice” (p. 93), as Zaborowski puts it. From this argument, Zaborowski moves onto one of the major analytical foci of the book, namely the analysis of how people’s generational identities manifest through listening habits and interpretations of music (Chapter 3). Taking the examples of two generational cohorts of Japanese music listeners – namely, the ‘Lost Generation’ [*ushinawareta sedai*] (born between 1972–1982) and the ‘Relaxed Generation’ [*yutori sedai*] (born between 1988–1996), Zaborowski highlights how historical developments, socioeconomic parameters, and technological changes (such as streaming and platformization) impact on the ways in which listeners from these different generations make sense of, and engage with, music, even when the musical content as such might not diverge much. I found this chapter particularly arresting as it brings to the fore again the analytical importance of generations for contemporary audience research and digital studies, yet also shows how we need to widen our notion of generation itself to not only consider demographics and social context but also people’s self-identification and cultural practices. Chapters 4 and 5, “Participation and Proximity” and “Idols and Virtual Idols”, then take a deeper look at Japan’s popular music sector and specifically focus on artist-audience relationships. Chapter 4 presents a detailed discussion of the history of the Japanese popular music scene, paying particular attention to how cultural market structures and technological changes have impacted on the role and form of audience-artist interaction. Zaborowski uses this chapter to trouble western-centric understandings of parasocial interactions and stargazing by showing how proximity between audiences and music artists is understood and takes form in Japanese media and culture. Chapter 5 builds on this and specifically turns to the importance of (virtual) pop idols. Introducing two case studies – the girl bands AKB48 and Momoiro Clover and the virtual idol Hatsune Miku, a famous representative of Japan’s vocaloid culture – Zaborowski analyzes how the different production and distribution models behind these cases influence how fans perceive their idols’ authenticity and their proximity to them. Again, this chapter uses the case of Japan’s music scene to make broader contributions to established concepts in audience research, this time by arguing for a broadening of du Gay et al.’s (1997) circuit of culture model to also account for processes of producer–fan co-evolution and audience–artist proximity.

Overall, *Music generations in the Digital Age* is a rigorously researched and thoughtfully written exploration of music's role in identity, technology, and culture today. By focusing on the varied musical landscape of contemporary Japan, Zaborowski provides a fresh perspective for scholars in media studies and cultural studies by complexifying our understanding of music and meaning-making practices and by de-westernizing established conceptions of media, audiences, and listening. In conclusion, this book is an essential albeit rather dense read for researchers and students interested in the intersections of music, audiences, and technology today.

Reference

du Gay, P., Hall, S., Janes, L., Mackay, H., & Negus, K. (1997). *Doing cultural studies: The story of the Sony Walkman*. London: Sage.