

**Can Music Make You Sick? Measuring the price of musical ambition by Sally A. Gross & George Musgrave, Westminster University Press, London, ISBN 978-1-912656-64-6 (paperback)**



**Book review by Daniel Nordgård**

This is a much-anticipated book, building on years of work and rich data – quantitative as well as qualitative. The book builds on, or continues the works from 2016 and 2017 after the two authors were commissioned by Help Musicians UK to write a two-part report entitled "Can music make you sick?" The two initial reports build on a large survey among British musicians and artists (2016) and a series of in-depth interviews (2017). While the two reports have circulated and become reference points for many (myself included), the book provides new and richer narratives that adds to the previous reports.

The book poses the rhetoric (and to some perhaps provocative) question; Can music make you sick? The answer to the question is provided early in the book, already in the introductory chapter by referring back to the surveys that their previous two reports built on, as an unequivocal *yes*. Music *can* make you sick! And from the very start, the book flags the tone of the topics being addressed. These are serious issues, issues of suffer and struggle, and even of life and death. Albeit carefully avoiding reducing the topic to a select few celebrities' tragic deaths, the introduction opens by pointing to the many high-profile deaths we've witnessed these last couple of years. If nothing else, then to remind us that the topic has been evident and in plain sight for a long time. It's not been hiding. And the book provides a compelling and well-grounded structure to discuss these difficult issues.

Throughout the introductory chapter, three main objectives are presented. First of all, it aims *"to provide an empirical understanding of how contemporary musical artists and professional musicians experience the aspiration to build a musical career, and how these musicians feel about their emotional wellbeing and mental health"*. Secondly, it aims *"to understand contemporary conditions for creativity and their impacts on musicians and their mental wellbeing"*. Thirdly, the book aims at understanding how the two former conditions *"relates to education and (professional) training"*, embedded in their own experiences as teachers, researchers and academics.

The book provides six chapters whereby the first two provides a framework for the next three. In both first chapters a bridge is built to the survey and the quantitative analysis presented in their previous report (2016) as well as providing a theoretical backdrop for the book and its analyses. A central theme here, which is being discussed throughout the book, is how music and musical work is understood in relations to digitalization. They critically discuss how musicians and music is being affected by abundance – an abundance of culture, of content and creators. And by referring to David Bowie's much cited statement that in the future, music would become like running water, or electricity, they make clear that in an era of unlimited access (for artists and fans) music and

musicianship risks becoming abundant and mundane. And that this in turn may have significant impact on artists and musicians and their aspirations and conditions for building musical careers. The book takes a critical position towards narratives of digitalization, neatly articulated in the beginning of chapter 4, where the authors establish that their "*view is that contemporary ideas of artistic empowerment in the digital age are dangerous, as they reinforce an idea of individualized entrepreneurial control which is largely illusory*".

While the two first chapters are interesting, adding to an already established field of critical debate on the effects from digitalization, it's the next three chapters that really provides new and interesting insights. Here they work more thoroughly and in depth with the interviews initially reported on in 2017. The book-format allows the authors to work with the topics in more detail and by constructing themes for the reader to better understand the analyses the two authors provide. The three chapters are organized as three distinctive angles, illuminating and discussing *the status of work* (ch. 3), *the status of value* (ch. 4) and *the status of relationships* (ch. 5). Throughout these three chapters, narratives are told, drawing on a wealth of data from the 28 in-depth interviews and using excerpts to highlight or exemplify important issues. These could be the workload for an artist trying to create music as well as a brand and a business (3.1), the vulnerability of depending on an online feedback culture (4.1.1), or on luck (4.2.3). Or the challenges with balancing family and social life with aspirations for a musical career (5.1). The three chapters displays a broad and unsettling list of issues that might help explain the initial findings in their 2016 survey – that a disproportionately large part of the respondents say that they've experienced anxiety and depression.

In the sixth and last chapter, they conclude by addressing what their findings must lead to, with regards to public, political and academic debates. Already, they state, progress is happening, simply by the issue being addressed and more initiatives on mental health appearing over the last couple of years (6.3). But, perhaps even more important, what do these findings mean for music education (6.4) and the role and re-

sponsibility educational institutions? No doubt, as a teacher myself, at a master's program for music business and management, these questions followed me while reading this book. And although the authors don't provide the answers, they nonetheless manage to pose some critically important questions.

This is an important book and a timely one. Sadly, the issues being addressed seem more important than ever, with Covid-19 and the impacts the pandemic has had on this particular sector. As the two authors also notes, the data is collected prior to the Covid-19 outbreak, but this will no doubt have a significant impact on the sector, making matters worse. Hopefully, the current crisis may help put further focus on the issues being addressed in this book and in the longer run, perhaps initiate change that might help future musicians and artists not being sick.