

Rebecca M. Rinsema, *Listening In Action: Teaching Music in the Digital Age*. New York: Routledge, 2017. xv + 172 pages. \$121.60. ISBN 978-1-472-44351-9. Ebook (\$38.47) ISBN 978-1-315-59255-8.

CHRISTOPHER J. WITULSKI, BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY

According to Rebecca M. Rinsema, the ways in which instructors use listening with their students are disconnected from what they actually do in their own lives. This failure to recognize “just listening” as an authentic form of musical engagement marginalizes what could be an important classroom tool. In *Listening in Action: Teaching Music in the Digital Age*, she examines student listening practices and challenges teachers to meet students where they are. The book is a part of a series for Routledge Press from SEMPRE, the Society for Education, Music, and Psychology Research (<http://www.sempre.org.uk>) titled “Studies in the Psychology of Music,” which focuses on musical learning.¹ It is guided by the author’s own experience teaching popular music to undergraduate liberal studies students, who will likely sound familiar to most college-level teachers.

Rinsema orients her book around a pair of questions. With regard to the “new era” of listening since the introduction of Apple’s iPod in 2001, she asks “What do music listening practices and experiences consist of in the age of digital technologies?” Her second question is “What should music educators do, in terms of music listening, to facilitate music learning in the digital age?”² In addressing these two large questions, *Listening in Action* brings a wide range of literature into conversation. While she writes primarily for music education researchers and teachers of appreciation or popular music-type high school and college-level classes, she provides a real service by integrating knowledge from a wealth of tangential fields (especially musicology, philosophy, and ethnomusicology). Rinsema illuminates the ways in which these perspectives—especially

1. Other reviewed works in this series include Reeves Shulstad, Review of *Creative Teaching for Creative Learning in Higher Music Education*, Elizabeth Haddon and Pamela Burnard, eds., this *Journal* 7, no. 2 (2017): 136–39.

2. Rebecca M. Rinsema, *Listening in Action: Teaching Music in the Digital Age* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 2.

their history of bias toward composer intention and decontextualized musical texts—have shaped music education’s focus on “structural listening” to the exclusion of “everyday music listening experiences.” This leads to a tripartite central thesis:

Everyday music listening is meaningful.
Everyday music listening can lead to musical understanding
Everyday music listening is creative.³

Listening in Action is organized into three sections. The first, “Philosophy,” presents a history of thinking about listening, with special attention given to music education’s various approaches. The second, “Observation,” details Rinsema’s own study of music education models and the listening practices of students. The third, “Practice,” outlines broad principles for music teachers and researchers based on insights gained from her study.

The first section, “Philosophy,” articulates the “gap that exists between the in-school and out-of-school musical experiences of children and adolescents.”⁴ Rinsema critiques various models of learning that inform much music education pedagogy. She especially engages concepts such as Madsen and Geringer’s “passive hearing” and active listening⁵ and David Elliot’s praxialism.⁶ Using recent studies, she problematizes the “focus model” of active listening. One of the book’s many insights concerns Rose Subotnik’s study of the early twentieth-century philosophers Theodor Adorno and Arnold Schoenberg and the idea of the concentration of musical meaning within the music itself, with respect to the composer’s intent.⁷ This concept of musical meaning, Rinsema argues, resulted in the notion of the “ideal listener,” a fictional persona frequently referenced in music education who is able to discern innate meaning from music through listening.

Building on previous scholarship, Rinsema shows how this concept of the ideal listener is linked to classroom bias toward listening for learned musical terms, concepts, and structures (“phrase, tonality, or form,” for example) and away from everyday listening experiences.⁸ She responds by arguing that all listening is a meaningful activity constitutive of personal and social identity,

3. Rinsema, 5.

4. Rinsema, 15.

5. Clifford Madsen and John Geringer, “A Focus of Attention Model for Meaningful Listening,” *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* 147 (Winter 2000/2001).

6. David Elliot, *Music Matters: A New Philosophy of Music Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995 and 2014).

7. Rose Subotnik, *Deconstructive Variations: Music and Reason in Western Society* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

8. She is primarily following Rose Subotnik’s work, cited above, and Ola Stockfelt, *Musik Som Lyssnandets Konst: En Analys av WA Mozarts Symfoni no. 40, g moll K. 550 [Music as the Art*

and she calls for researchers to attend to this bias, claiming that “music education researchers have investigated everyday listening practices and investigated ways in which such practices could inform music listening pedagogies on a very limited basis.”⁹ Her well-researched review of recent scholarship shows that this is hardly an innovative claim, but the continued disjuncture between some pedagogical approaches and the lived realities of many students necessitates her intervention.

The second part of the book, “Observation,” recounts the study itself. Rinsema’s extended interviews with ten undergraduate liberal arts college students focused on music listening technologies and the participants’ listening preferences before moving beyond questions of aesthetics to examine ideas of identity, influence, and personal development. Broadly, these interviews seek to discover how, when, and why these students listen to music. (Short biographical narratives and the thematic material that she covers in her interviews appear in the appendices, allowing us to see a range of musical training and family histories.) The five chapters of Part II proceed to relate the participants’ responses—which variously support and contradict the scholarship—to pedagogical and theoretical concepts (like passive listening and praxialism). This juxtaposition extends these tools in a way that more accurately reflects students’ experiences.

Chapter 5, “Organizing the Experience,” is particularly insightful in demonstrating the organizational power of digital technology and the resulting opportunity for creativity. For example, she highlights the ubiquity of “title” and “artist” as organizing structures and further observes that “[a]ll of the participants said that they do not regularly use the categories of album and genre when searching for songs” (85). This points toward a listener-centric organization that ignores, or at least minimizes, the artist’s intentions (by discarding an album’s order) and the music industry’s efforts at categorization (through structures like genre). The album, she notes, is a playlist made by someone else and genre is, as described by one of the participants, largely a marketing tool:

Yeah, people say they play music like acoustic-indie-grunge-funk and I’m like whatever. I’m not even sure what that means, just random words put together for, like, a certain kind of image for their band, I think.¹⁰

Despite the attention Rinsema gives to listener agency in organizing musical experiences, the speed at which these technologies change creates lacunae. For example, Spotify’s platform, which is frequently mentioned in the book, offers a wealth of pre-created playlists targeted for specific moods or activities.

of Listening: An Analysis of WA Mozart’s Symphony No. 40 in G minor (K. 550)] (Gothenburg, Germany: University of Gothenburg, 1988).

9. Rinsema, 29.

10. Rinsema, 86.

Many participants create lists for purposes of study, exercise, sleep, and joy. She does not, however, address how often those lists are discarded or adapted once Spotify puts new proprietary ones like “Beast Mode,” “Deep House Relax,” or “Acoustic Summer” on a user’s home screen. Rinsema does relate nuanced reflections from the study participants however, who articulate how accurate statistical records (like play counts) influence them, how they will skip within and across songs to see what is “working” for them, and why some use services like Pandora or functions like the shuffle button to “choose chance.”¹¹

Highlights from other chapters in this section include discussions of how participants use these technologies to navigate both physical and a variety of imagined virtual spaces, leading toward further implications about how listening can create musical understanding (Chapter 6). Digital technologies also consistently granted a degree of self-control over listening practices that served adolescent development for each participant, showing that these experiences are both meaningful and creative (Chapter 7).

The third section, “Practice,” contains pedagogical recommendations that recognize how musical experiences are creative products that do not require formal training. Rinsema counters the idea, put forward by Robert Dunn, that musical experiences are a means an end. Instead she contends that the very act, not any “mental representations” arising from it, is a creative product.¹² Her goal is for everyday listening to be valued more directly, consistently, and intentionally within the classroom. To this end, she provides a set of principles and practices that “mirror and extend” student experiences. These include encouraging students’ exploration of their own listening practices; exploring (and teaching) resources for listening; providing language to talk about listening and its role within other activities, including teaching the terminology that Rinsema uses in this book; mirroring everyday listening practices like creating playlists, sharing music, and incorporating movement into listening within the classroom; experimenting with different speakers and headphones to engage space; and invoking reflection on choices, comparisons, and broader questions about what one chooses to listen to and why. Overall, her approach stresses that teachers should not assume that students completely understand and know how to maximize listening technologies. On the contrary, music educators can contribute to meaningful and relevant everyday listening practices by teaching critical skills with, and about, digital technologies.

There is one fundamental gap in the discussion of how this “new era” differs from that of the past: there is no engagement with the pre- and post-streaming

11. Rinsema, 89-90.

12. Robert Dunn, “Contemporary Research on Music Listening: A Holistic View,” in *MENC Handbook of Research on Music Learning: Volume 2: Applications*, ed. Richard Colwell and Peter Webster (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3–60.

reality of access to new music. What happens to listening, when so much of the world's recorded music is immediately available? How does that level of access transform consumer behavior from that of earlier times, when one might need to save up for a particular new single or release at the expense of choosing a different one? How are communities of listening today different from those of the past, when one might have had to go to a friend's house to hear the latest album from a favorite artist? These questions, admittedly, are not strictly speaking a part of the effort to better understand contemporary university students' individual listening practices. But addressing them would have helped Rinsema to speak more directly those teachers who may read her pedagogical recommendations. Her thoughts on these questions might have helped teachers who struggle with what they may themselves see as a gap between their listening practice and those of their students. To this end, she does emphasize the opportunity that collaboration provides for exploring musical communities within the classroom, and some participants reflected on family members or friends who influenced their own listening histories, yet there remains an opening for further work to see how these observations relate to communities of listeners outside the classroom.

Listening in Action concludes with a call for "musical hermeneutics" at all levels of the music education curriculum. Rinsema observes that finding meaning in musical content often sits within the domain of higher education and argues instead for activities that engage meaning and meaning creation relationally, by bringing in other multimedia forms, for example. She cites these activities as personal and creative while noting the importance of meaning creation for her participants' adolescent development. Using Lawrence Kramer's work on hermeneutic windows as a model, she redirects agency from the music-as-object model to listeners by focusing on media integrations (the relationship between music and video, album art, or other imagery, for example), allusions (music that relates to other music), and actions (the relationship between music and other activities or contexts).¹³ Rinsema demonstrates the practicality of her listener-centric methodology through a welcome case study of her own teaching in which she uses popular music videos to explore how artists and listeners alike create meaning in music. Her examples also serve to problematize pedagogical examples drawn from other music education texts. This leads to an impassioned plea in the final chapter:

The problem is that there is such a rush to get students to create something (anything!) tangible that hermeneutic explorations are truncated and, even more often, completely skipped over. What many music educators miss is

13. Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

that the construction of possible meanings of the music is a creative process in and of itself.¹⁴

While the book is not particularly long, its various literature reviews and contemporary approach to student listening practices could prove useful in music education classrooms and as a component of pedagogy courses in musicology and ethnomusicology. I do wonder if using pedagogical models as a foil obscures excellent teaching practices that are “in the wild”—case studies of teachers and teaching would have provided both a more accurate picture of what teaching looks like in the “digital age” and also more specific ideas for the educators who are the intended audience of the book.

Listening in Action opens the potential for new approaches in the classroom, especially as services like Spotify and Apple Music make playlist curation and other listening-oriented activities both accessible and affordable for students and increasingly replace the need for expensive licensed CD sets. While I question whether the bias toward “structural listening” is overstated, Rinsema’s challenge to assess teaching practices and reconsider how to approach listening in the classroom is worthwhile and may lead to course revisions and stronger student engagement as educators strive to meet students where they are, making classes—especially those for non-music majors—increasingly relevant.

14. Rinsema, 149.