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Review

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What power structures render certain sounds audible while relegating others to inaudibility and whose sounds are deemed worthy of attention? What are the limits and potential of music as a practice of resistance among marginalized communities? How do institutional and epistemic regimes shape scholarly practice by guiding to whom we listen and how? In her new book *ReSounding Poverty: Romani Music and Development Aid* Adriana N. Helbig engages critically with the mediating roles of development frameworks, advocacy, and the mobilization of culture as an activist tool to address these questions. What comes out of Helbig's work is a multilayered, ethically attentive, and meticulously nuanced ethnography.

While the book traces Romani musical practices in Transcarpathia from the Soviet into the post-Soviet period, Helbig's central intervention lies in probing the limits of music-centered frameworks by foregrounding the everyday sounds and silences of the Romani poor. She demonstrates in detail how the elevation of music and musicianship as primary modes of representation can enable livelihoods while simultaneously constraining access to education and development resources for those "marginalized within the marginalized" (15). In this respect, Helbig turns our attention to the soundscapes of the Romani poor, whose everyday sonic experiences tend to fall outside the reach of development and advocacy frameworks and are consequently rendered less audible within broader Romani aid economies.

The book employs a sophisticated narrative and analytical approach that moves fluidly between intimate ethnographic moments, material and historical contexts, and reflexive engagement with the institutional conditions under which academic knowledge

is produced. Rather than grounding her analysis in fixed identity positions, Helbig situates herself and the system she analyzes within institutional systems, thereby shifting the analytical focus from individual actors to the broader material processes that shape the lives of the Romani poor. In this way, beyond its substantive contributions, *ReSounding Poverty* also serves as a compelling example of critical reflexivity, offering important insights for scholars attentive to the ethics and craft of ethnography.

Helbig's book offers a multilayered analysis carefully calibrating the movement between macro-level political economies and micro-level sonic and bodily experiences without privileging one over the other. A comparable shift unfolds in the writing: as attention moves away from music to everyday sonic life, such as coughing, untuned instruments, and silences in the field that index bodily, and material conditions rather than deliberate expressions. In these passages, silence becomes an analytical tool emerging as an object worthy of ethnomusicological attention.

The first four chapters map the historical conditions through which Romani musicians acquired visibility and relative privilege under the Soviet regime and the subsequent post-socialist transition, while also examining the roles of NGOs and academic institutions in shaping minority rights discourse. In doing so, this section foregrounds the unintended consequences of advocacy frameworks that have unevenly redistributed visibility and resources within Romani communities.

Situated within the Russian Empire, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods, the first chapter traces the historical formation of Romani musicianship across shifting political regimes, examining how musical labor became a privileged site of visibility and mediation. Instead of framing the Romani musician as a timeless stereotype, Helbig locates this figure within concrete material conditions, showing how professional entertainers gained relative privilege through their proximity to non-Romani spaces, institutions, and audiences. The advantages acquired included access to mobility, income, and recognition, these later translated into cultural and political capital in the post-Soviet period and positioned professional musicians as authoritative representatives at a moment of institutional collapse and transition. The chapter thus advances a cultural-materialist perspective, demonstrating how racialized imaginaries are reproduced not simply through processes of othering or representation, but through material infrastructures of labor, access, and political mediation.

Shifting attention to post-Soviet aid, the second chapter offers a careful analysis of NGO initiatives and the emergence of middle-class Romani musicians as key mediators within the framework of development organizations. Helbig places NGOs at the center of the post-Soviet period, a time when the state was increasingly withdrawing social welfare assistance and promoting market liberalization, thus leaving NGOs to address the material effects of Romani poverty. In this context, access to aid required specific forms of cultural capital, linguistic competence, institutional literacy, and narrative fluency, which many Romani living in poverty did not possess. As a result, professional Romani musicians, already visible through historical patterns of cultural mediation, which was further amplified by the post-1990s music market, appear as particularly

legible interlocutors within NGO and advocacy regimes, often assuming representative roles. Helbig demonstrates that this process is structural rather than opportunistic, shaped by historical, economic, and institutional conditions rather than individual intent. The section on “Gypsies of Soros” is especially significant for the way it reframes philanthropic support not simply as a political or economic intervention, but as a cultural and representational infrastructure that produces classed forms of Romani visibility, audibility, and authority. Through this analysis, Helbig shows how aid frameworks can reconfigure existing inequalities by redistributing access, recognition, and representational power within Romani communities.

Acting as a bridge between the book’s structural analysis and its later sonic turn, the third chapter extends questions of mediation and responsibility to the realm of academic knowledge production itself. It gestures to the book’s gradual movement from music and representation towards everyday sound, vulnerability, broken instruments, illness, and practices of listening in spaces where audibility itself begins to falter. The chapter’s most significant contribution lies in demonstrating how advocacy, expertise, and ethnographic knowledge are embedded within the same political and economic infrastructures, a point Helbig develops by reflexively situating her own scholarly position within these systems. In this way, the chapter invites readers, particularly scholars of music, to reconsider how they are attuned to listening amid the uneven conditions produced by contemporary political and economic regimes.

Grounded in Transcarpathia’s layered histories of movement and labor, the fourth chapter examines Romani musical life through shifting regimes of mobility, infrastructure, and economic change. The chapter shows how the collapse of Soviet-era performance venues (particularly restaurants) rendered musical labor increasingly unsustainable in the post-Soviet period, contributing to the gradual disappearance of music from everyday public life. Rather than framing this shift as a simple failure of cultural preservation or advocacy, Helbig interprets it as the outcome of broader economic transformations that reconfigured spaces of performance and mobility, setting the stage for the book’s turn toward everyday sound, silence, and vulnerability.

The second half of the book calls for an ethics of attentive listening, inviting the reader to become an earwitness to the sonic experiences of people whose health is shaped by the traumas of post-socialism. While Helbig does not explicitly divide this section, the chapters unfold in two analytical movements. The first of these chapters shows how music becomes an increasingly fragile form of labor and representation, as mobility, poverty, and material constraints disrupt musicianship and shift attention toward everyday sound. The latter chapters move further inward, centering on illness, breath, silence, trauma, and reflexive ethnographic listening, where music often recedes entirely and sound becomes inseparable from physical vulnerability and care.

Through deliberately fragmented storytelling, the fifth chapter traces relational processes while foregrounding the material and temporal conditions that structure Romani poverty. A key strength of the chapter lies in its careful exposition of the material and temporal conditions that structure Romani poverty. By foregrounding the concept of time poverty, Helbig shows how inadequate infrastructure, limited employment

opportunities, and long distances systematically constrain access to aid and networks of support, particularly for the Romani poor.

Scarcity comes into sharp sonic focus in the sixth chapter, where tuning operates as both a material practice and an analytic orientation, capturing how musicians, bodies, and listeners alike adjust to conditions of instability. Helbig shows how scarcity becomes perceptible by way of untuned and broken instruments, bodily fatigue, and the labor required to maintain sound under increasingly unstable conditions. Rather than treating music as an inherently resilient or resistant practice, the chapter gestures toward the limits of sound and musicianship as a reliable means of survival. Attention to material factors further underscores how environmental and infrastructural conditions shape which sounds endure. Most importantly, the chapter demonstrates how musical repertoires themselves shift in response to these constraints, revealing how scarcity reshapes not only instruments and bodies, but also the possibilities of musical traditions.

Focusing on the body as a site where sound and vulnerability converge, the seventh chapter examines how illness becomes audible under conditions of poverty. Helbig shows how bodily sounds, such as coughing, function as modes of diagnosis in contexts where access to healthcare is limited or absent. She also attends carefully to practices such as smoking in musicians' lives, not as individualized risk behaviors, but as socially embedded acts that complicate dominant moral narratives of health, responsibility, and blame. Crucially, the chapter maps how illness disrupts musicians' ability to regulate their labor time, rendering their bodies increasingly vulnerable within already precarious conditions.

As one of the book's most intimate and poetic moments, the final chapter offers a powerful, reflexive meditation on ethnographic experience during and after fieldwork. Silence emerges here as the chapter's central analytical and affective register. As sound recedes, the reader is left primarily with their own interior listening, a space in which echoes of one's own fieldwork practices, uncertainties, and perceived failures may surface. In this sense, the chapter becomes almost a handbook for scholars navigating uncertainty, ethical vulnerability, and the fragmented nature of ethnographic work.

Building on earlier scholarship, including her previous works, which privileged Romani musical traditions, professional musicianship, and performance as sites for challenging stereotypes and advancing activist agendas, Helbig expands this body of work by carefully demonstrating the limits of these historically produced sound-based imaginaries. Throughout the book she draws attention to sounds of untuned instruments, coughing, illness, and silence as soundmarks of economic inequality and vulnerability. In doing so, she unsettles persistent tropes of Romani musicality by grounding sound within the material instabilities that intensified in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse. *ReSounding Poverty* contributes to ethnomusicology, especially the applied and critical strands of the field, through its engagement with music and labor, sonic governance, and listening, in dialogue with sound studies, poverty studies, disability studies, and critical development scholarship.

Author Biography

Burcu Yaşın is a PhD candidate in the Humanities program at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Society and Culture, Concordia University, Montréal. Her doctoral research examines how Romani communities in Turkey have been sonically imagined since Turkey's bid for European Union membership and how these imaginaries circulate across the music market, activism, and policymaking. Her research is funded by the Orient-Institut Istanbul and the Fonds de recherche du Québec – Société et Culture, and she is an active member of the Transgressive Sounds and Atmospheres research-creation group.