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Intimate Strangers: The Formal Distance Between Music and Politics in Canada

On October 3, 2009, Prime Minister Stephen Harper appeared unannounced at a gala fundraising event at Ottawa’s National Arts Centre, where—with a little help from cellist Yo-Yo Ma, among others—he gave a performance of the Beatles tune “With a Little Help from My Friends.” Generally, this performance seems to have gone down well, at least with the audience and the press. The prime minister’s piano playing was adequate, the quality of his singing just about right—neither so good nor so bad as to occasion suspicion about prodigious competence or a lack thereof.

The choice of material was also clever on a number of fronts. If the song was not a Canadian one, it was, as a Beatles song, a suitably ecumenical choice. This particular Beatles tune was especially well chosen, not least for its self-deprecatory opening (“What would you do if I sang out of tune? Would you stand up and walk out on me?”), which disarms potential critics of the performance at the outset. It is also worth remembering that Lennon and McCartney wrote this song for Ringo Starr, bearing in mind his limited range. Thus, the song does not demand vocal pyrotechnics from its performer. The context also helped: it was a singular event and it took place as part of a performing arts gala, a plausible setting for a prime minister to engage in public music making.
These are all prudent strategies for reducing risk through very careful deployment of music in what is incontestably a political and potentially risky situation. If Stephen Harper were a politician given to bursting into song or sitting down at the piano on the slightest pretext, his performances might simply have been tiresome. Here, the prime minister earned points for being willing to depart from his buttoned-down image, showing a more relaxed side of himself. It was a moment where he could be seen as uncharacteristically, albeit briefly, apolitical, convincing at least some Canadians that he has a life outside of partisan politics. And while it is unlikely that we will see a sudden unveiling of political leaders’ hitherto unsuspected musicianship in any widespread fashion, in December 2010, Liberal MP Bob Rae did challenge Harper to a piano play-off. Unfortunately, the dueling pianos scenario did not materialize. Shortly after issuing the challenge, Rae slipped on ice and broke his wrist—in any case, the prime minister had not responded.

At first glance, many of the characteristics of the Arts Centre event may serve to reinforce the notion that in Canada, music and politics have little to do with one another: it is certainly one of the few examples of such an encounter. But Harper’s performance was in fact rife with politics. The presence of Yo-Yo Ma, who earlier in the year had played at the US presidential inauguration of Barack Obama, may have had some political resonance. Harper’s performance was vaguely reminiscent of Bill Clinton’s saxophone playing on MTV during the 1992 presidential campaign. (Jean Chrétien also took a turn with the trombone at a National Arts Centre gala in the 1990s).

Much more than this, the background of Stephen Harper’s relationship with the Canadian arts community adds a great deal to the political dimension of this event. A year earlier, during the fall 2008 election campaign, the prime minister referred to precisely this sort of arts gala in less than complimentary terms: “I think when ordinary working people come home, turn on the TV and see a gala of a bunch of people at, you know, a rich gala all subsidized by the taxpayers—claiming their subsidies aren’t high enough, when they know those subsidies have actually gone up—I’m not sure that’s something that resonates with ordinary people.” These remarks were made in response to criticism from the Québec arts community of his government’s decision to cut two arts programs aimed at promoting Canadian culture abroad—Trade Routes and PromArt. The examples rolled out as alleged evidence of their wastefulness were primarily music related—an African tour by guitarist Tal
Bachman, a European Tour by a punk band with a suitably confrontational name (Fucked Up), and a visit to a Swedish conference on digital music by music business entrepreneur Al Mair. Some pundits and pollsters viewed the decision to cut these programs (and Harper’s response to criticism for this) as at least partially responsible for a collapse in Conservative support in Québec, a development that may have cost the party a majority government.⁴

So Harper’s appearance might be viewed as a way of mending fences with the Canadian arts community. Above all, his performance was unavoidably political because he is the prime minister and almost anything he does in public has a political dimension. Moreover, in performing this way, he possibly achieved some political goals precisely by appearing apolitical. This was immediately apparent in the mostly positive comments from political pundits.⁵ Some pollsters opined that his performance played a role in a sudden spike in the party’s popularity.⁶ This is not to say that the entire episode was cynically constructed in every detail but merely to point out the difficulty of separating music and politics in such a situation.

**MUSIC IN POLITICS**

This event is interesting because it provides one example of how music can figure in political communication in Canada. There are, however, many other ways of framing the subject. To better understand the possible variations on this theme, we might pose the following questions:

- How do Canadian politicians and political parties use music in their communication with the public?
- How do Canadians comment on politics or express political opinions through music?

In addressing the first question, we could examine the use of music in campaigns at public events or in political advertisements. This would also include the rare instances in which our political figures have used music, as in our above example. What role does music play in shaping the messages communicated in these situations? In answering the second question, we might examine instances of politically motivated music making in Canada. With
regard to both questions, it seems that Canadians do not very often deploy music for political ends, and it is worth asking why this is the case.

If music has not played a prominent role in political communication, one reason may be wariness about aestheticizing our politics. For most of us, music serves primarily as entertainment and, as such, is distinct from politics. Framing political messages musically might seem to trivialize their content. This hasn’t prevented Canadian politicians altogether from engaging in the odd performance, as in our above example, or from associating themselves with musicians—for instance, Paul Martin’s friendship with Bono of U2, which had all sorts of political ramifications for both parties. Such associations are ways in which politicians and political figures convey something of their personalities. For both Harper and Martin, this was music (and politics) as performance inasmuch as it consisted of particular events and the taking on of certain personas in the course of these events. Such events seldom entail much in the way of content, or the content is so diffuse as to be difficult to articulate. Music has often been acknowledged as the least referential of art forms, which limits its use for political messaging. In any case, such performances are directed more at how we feel about these politicians than at what we think of their performances.

It is in its relation to our feelings and emotions that music features in political events and campaigns. Its aim is to excite the audience, to cue certain moments such as the arrival of a candidate or applause at the end of a speech. It is a signal for emotion, attaching itself to rather than forming the content of what may have been said at such events. So, too, with campaign songs, which are frequently well-known pop songs with recognizable and vaguely suitable titles, frequently repeated throughout the song: for instance, “Takin’ Care of Business” or “Let’s Work Together,” the latter, a Canned Heat song, used by both Barack Obama in his presidential campaign and New Brunswick PC MLA David Alward. The song’s content probably does not matter very much: indeed, there have been cases where closer examination of the lyrics could potentially have undermined the candidate or her message.

The music in campaign ads is generally unremarkable—chosen to align with the message. Two fairly recent examples from the Canadian political ads illustrate this approach. The Conservative Party’s attack ad that questioned Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff’s motives as a politician featured a minor key and a vaguely agitated, unresolved melody that might prompt in listeners a
certain uneasiness, which they might attach to Ignatieff himself.11 A Liberal Party ad attacking the Harper government’s economic policies does so to a sprightly rhythm, with the melody arriving just as the ad switches to laying out the Liberals’ own policies, thus subtly underscoring the difference in approach while providing continuity within the ad.12 But it is difficult to see these uses of popular music as central to the conduct of Canadian politics. Certainly, nobody has ever suggested that a campaign has been won or lost on its choice of music or that musical talent is crucial to a career in politics.

Although Canadians are not unique in this respect, there are perhaps some particular aspects of Canadian politics that further limit music’s deployment. Music may not generally be representational, but it can be, and much of its political relevance derives from this ability.13 Music may serve as a marker of identity for many different kinds of communities, including entire nations. In Canada, we do not have an identifiable national musical style: we have no musical genre that represents the country as a whole in the way that, for instance, flamenco does for Spain or samba for Brazil. This limits, to some degree, the ability of politicians to use music to invoke a national identity (apart from singing the national anthem). Thus, it is worth asking just how and what music represents in Canada. Certainly, we can point to music as a marker of differences among regions across the country, especially in Québec. Other regions—for instance, Newfoundland or Cape Breton—can also lay claim to regionally distinctive styles of folk music. But for English Canada, at least, this does not amount to a national music. The enormous range of music produced by Canadians militates against any definition that would adequately sum up its national character. It is, therefore, not an easy task to point to a particular style of music that we ourselves, or others, would identify as essentially or distinctively Canadian. In fact, Canada’s problem (if indeed it is a problem) may not be a lack of musical identities around which to form but rather a plethora of them that stubbornly resist any attempt to reduce them to a unified character. Testa and Shedden argue persuasively against a number of attempts to define a Canadian national style in rock music, characterizing such views as based only on the thinnest evidence and as being overly selective, not only in the artists they consider but also in which career phases of those artists they examine.14 Likewise, Elaine Keillor, faced with the diversity of Canadian musical expression, questions whether it is possible to identify a singular, distinctive Canadian music style.15
This state of affairs is in no way essential. In Brazil, samba, which also began as a local style, may act as an index of music’s “Brazilianness,” but this is only as a result of decades of deliberate appropriation by government through control over broadcast programming. Closer to home, Line Grenier similarly suggests that Québec’s national identification with the musical tradition of chanson has been produced by “historically contingent linkages of discourses and institutions.” In English Canada, the linkages necessary to knit together national identity and musical style have simply not been made. This lack of an identifiable national musical style limits the degree to which music can be used in Canada to represent the country on a national level. There may be styles or songs with which segments of the population might identify closely in Canada, but these would probably be meaningless to a much larger number of Canadians. This does not mean that Canadian music has no elements of nationalism, but that sentiment plays itself out in a different fashion. Rather than being able to hear how music is Canadian, we depend, as Will Straw suggests, on the knowledge that an artist or a song is Canadian to produce the “excess of affect” of national identification.

The prominent use of music throughout the opening ceremonies at the Vancouver Olympics in February 2010 illustrates both forms of Canadian musical nationalism and some of the challenges. First, there were performances by a number of distinguished Canadian musical artists: Nelly Furtado, Bryan Adams, Sarah McLachlan, Measha Bruggergosman, k.d. lang, Garou. Some of these were renditions of classic Canadian songs (Joni Mitchell’s “Both Sides Now,” Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah,” and Jean-Pierre Ferland’s “Un peu plus haut, un peu plus loin,” among others). Both the performers and the songs register as Canadian (at least with Canadians)—not because they offer a distinctively Canadian musical style or contain lyrical references to Canadian places or people but because we know that they are Canadian. The drawback with this form of nationalism is that one does indeed have to know in order for identification to take place, and such knowledge can be unevenly distributed across regions, communities, and even generations.

The segment comprising fiddle music was different—indeed, one could see it as an attempt to promote a particular Canadian musical style, but there are difficulties with an easy identification here. First, the styles were still primarily regional rather than national markers—even if the differences are inaudible to all but aficionados—and its internal diversity notwithstanding, it
did not appear to encompass any region of the country west of Ontario. Nor is it evident to most listeners how these regional styles are distinctive from those of other countries. If Canadians identify strongly with this music, it is not reflected in our overall listening habits. For many Canadians, this music is in no way a part of their national identity. The point is not that this music is not Canadian but that it has no particular priority over any number of other styles of music. No Canadian musician would or could be accused of not working in a Canadian idiom, musically speaking. We have made ourselves at home in any number of styles and, indeed, have participated in their development as musical genres. Again, we suffer not from a shortage of national identities here but from an overabundance such that none takes priority nor acts as a particular marker of “Canadianness.”

The fiddle music at the Olympic opening ceremonies could be read as an attempt to develop such a national music, but the style may not yet have acquired sufficient weight or cohesion to play this role effectively. The other notable Canadian musical presence in the opening ceremonies was that of Canada's First Nations. Here again, we are presented with diversity, as well as identities that may be vital to a complete sense of Canada but that are in no sense reducible to it. Once again, the attempt to portray Canadian identity musically results in putting more diversity into play, further complicating any attempt at representing Canada in musical terms.

In the Canadian context, then, nationalism in music faces a number of challenges. It must address a plethora of identities—regional, ethnic, and others. It depends upon the audience knowing that artists and/or their songs are Canadian—knowledge that is by no means guaranteed. The Vancouver Olympic opening ceremonies took years of planning and millions of dollars to create and, more to the point, had several hours over which to deploy various strategies in an attempt to meet these challenges. Such diversity bedevils political communication with music inasmuch as any single musical gesture is probably insufficiently representative—a particular problem when musical events in politics are relatively few in number.

Canadians can and do identify with music in any number of ways as members of subcultures, fan groups, or scenes, but it is likely that relatively few of these are accessible to conventional politics. Stephen Harper's performance demonstrates some of the constraints as well. The fact that our musical identity remains fragmented and multiple—and is becoming increasingly
so—makes the use of music risky since it can potentially be more divisive than unifying. Even our most popular musical figures such as Celine Dion have a polarizing effect. The risk, then, with using musical style to address Canadians politically is that in the context of a broad audience, it is more likely to be divisive than unifying, if it signifies at all.

Of course, musical style is not the only way in which the content of songs could be said to be Canadian. In the very brief discussion over proposed changes to our national anthem in March 2010, the focus remained on the words: there was no suggestion to alter the music. Lyrics can be explicit in a way that musical style cannot, and they are perhaps a more straightforward means of referencing Canada. For political scientist David J. Jackson, it is in the practice of naming and referring to Canadian places, people, and events that Canadian popular music has most clearly cultivated a national consciousness among listeners. As he points out, assessing the extent of this is difficult, to say the least. One could also suggest that his argument has some of the flaws that Testa and Shedden identify in attempts to define English Canadian popular music stylistically. Jackson bases his analysis on a fairly narrow selection of Canadian popular music. While acts such as The Guess Who, Blue Rodeo, The Tragically Hip, or Rheostatics may offer frequent and obvious Canadian references in their work, such references remain relatively infrequent or altogether absent in the work of many Canadian artists and, again, their specificity may make them more local and regional than national in their appeal.

**Politics in Music**

Given these limitations, Canadian references in lyrics may still act as reference points for nationalist sentiment. This is surely an important element in politics, but we might also reasonably expect political songs to be more specific and direct in addressing particular issues. We might also expect that, given this specificity, the effect of these songs might be more easily detected, but this does not seem to be the case. Political scientist David J. Jackson argues that popular music should have some role in shaping politics in English Canada but admits that there is no study showing that musical communication has played a major role in shaping Canadian attitudes toward an issue or has affected our basic political disposition. Jackson’s suggestion that empirical
research be done in this area has not yet been taken up. All he can offer in support of his claim for popular music’s political influence in Canadian politics is the brute fact of fifty million recordings sold in Canada in 2003, and the assumption that the messages embedded in those recordings must have some effect.23 That may be so, but this figure includes several thousand different recordings (the majority of them not Canadian) containing a wide variety of messages, most of which are not political except in the very loosest sense of the word. Moreover, British popular music scholar Simon Frith suggests that in general popular music, lyrics are not the most effective way to convey political messages. Whatever messages such songs contain are frequently lost as audiences misunderstand, reappropriate, or fail to identify the message, as occurred with Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the USA,” an anti-war song, adopted as a patriotic campaign song by Republicans.24 Frith’s point is that it is difficult to identify specifically what effects political songs might have on the attitudes of listeners. This contradicts any claims that might be made about the efficacy of song lyrics in intervening in Canadian politics, as elsewhere.

Canada does not have a particularly strong tradition of political song. Just as we have been reluctant to aestheticize our politics, so too have we been disinclined to politicize our music. Here again, we encounter the distinction between entertainment and politics, but on slightly different grounds. The Encyclopedia of Music in Canada suggests that “for much of the 20th-century songwriters in Canada have remained of the persuasion that music and politics inhabit separate spheres of life.”25 Nonetheless, political songs have always been a feature of popular music, even if we cannot be sure what effect such songs have had. It is easy to identify any number of well-known musical artists (for instance, Bruce Springsteen and U2) who voice their political concerns both in their music and in their public pronouncements. Some of the most iconic figures of twentieth-century popular music, such as John Lennon and Bob Dylan, made overtly political music at various stages of their careers. It would also be inaccurate to suggest that Canada has no tradition of political song whatsoever. One can find political songs scattered throughout the catalogues of our best-known artists, including Joni Mitchell (“Big Yellow Taxi”), Neil Young (“Ohio,” “Let’s Impeach the President”), and Stars (“He Lied About Death”). This may not amount to an enormous number of songs, but it is enough to suggest that Canadian musical artists do, at least occasionally, engage with politics directly.
But what is perhaps more interesting is the degree to which all of the above songs concern issues and political situations taking place outside of Canada. Other Canadian songs as well—such as The Guess Who’s “American Woman” or Bruce Cockburn’s “If I Had a Rocket Launcher,” for example—are certainly political but contain critiques of other governments, not ours. Neil Young has a fair number of overtly political numbers in his songbook, but these are primarily addressed to the Americans by an American citizen. Yet the fact that these songs are aimed at governments and issues located outside of Canada does not, by any means, negate their meaningfulness to Canadians. It might be more accurate to say that such concerns reflect our awareness of our connection with other parts of the world and of the fact that decisions, conflicts, and movements in these places, particularly the United States, may have a profound effect on us. This is consistent with Canada’s economic and political reality, not only in the promulgation of the view that we are “a trading nation” but also in our aspirations to see ourselves, if not as a major power, then at least as a participant in international affairs.

Nonetheless, whatever our attitude to or level of involvement in Canadian politics, this does not generally find expression in musical terms. This state of affairs may say less about the political indifference of Canadian musicians than it does about political and historical circumstance. Our politics does not often provide the kinds of issues that might move songwriters to voice their protest. We did not participate in the Vietnam War or in the recent Iraq War, nor did we go through the struggle for civil rights. These are the issues that have been the focus for political songs in the United States over the past fifty years. Our involvement in the War in Afghanistan has not resulted in much songwriting. A number of Canadian artists have been more than happy to voice support for the military by visiting bases in Afghanistan but have remained largely silent on matters concerning the conduct or aims of the war. Nor do other political issues—such as trade, taxation, social programs, or health care—seem to inspire much in the way of musical comment or involvement. Here, again, we have to make an exception for Québec, which does have an identifiable and long-standing tradition of political comment through song. *Chanson*—in the hands of writers and performers such as Félix Leclerc and Raymond Lévesque, for instance—has proved an instrument capable of voicing the political commentary. It may be that the issue of Québec sovereignty is relatively unique in providing the suitable conditions in Canada for political musical expression.
In the rest of Canada, however, political songs that deal with domestic concerns are relatively few and far between. David Jackson's examination of the political content of Blue Rodeo's oeuvre manages to raise a few examples. Of these, “Fools Like You” seems to offer a rare case of explicit political commentary. The song celebrates the defeat of the Meech Lake Accord, with reference to its inadequate recognition of First Nations. Even more unusual is “You Have a Choice,” a song released by a group of Canadian musicians—including K-Os, Sara Harmer, and members of Barenaked Ladies and Broken Social Scene—during the 2008 federal election. The song enjoined the populace to get out and vote against the Harper Conservatives in the election.

**Politics over Music**

Although these may be significant and interesting examples of political music in Canada, they do not cumulatively amount to an expansive or cohesive body of work. If they are all that we have to work with, then we must conclude that, in general, music and politics have little to do with one another in Canada. Music appears to have little calculable effect on our politics and has been used relatively sparingly in this context. However, there are other ways of examining the relationship between the two. To do so requires us to reorder the terms of our examination somewhat, giving us two new questions to consider:

- To what extent is music itself a political issue in Canada (in terms of access to music or control over its creation)?
- How, and to what extent, has government policy shaped the production, circulation, and consumption of music in Canada?

This moves us into the terrain of cultural policy. From the suite of policies that deal with the music industry in Canada, several not only have profound implications for what John Street calls “the power over music”; they have also, in some cases, occasioned political debate. There is nothing particularly novel in such a suggestion. Street suggests that any discussion of popular music and politics must concern itself with such questions. Many discussions of the relationship between Canadian politics and music reference the centrality of cultural policy. To do this, we have to shift our focus from music as
such to encompass the elements that contribute to its production, circulation, and consumption.

Yet even as we shift the terms of the discussion, there are some interesting continuities to explore. One of these is found in Canadian content regulation for radio, which provides us with a standard for determining what constitutes a Canadian musical recording. To do this, the CRTC uses the patriotically named MAPL system, devised by journalist and producer Stan Klees.

- **Music**—The music is composed by a Canadian.
- **Artist**—The principal performer is a Canadian.
- **Production**—The selection is performed or recorded in Canada.
- **Lyrics**—The lyrics are written by a Canadian.29

Any selection meeting two of the four criteria qualifies as Canadian content (which means that Stephen Harper’s performance qualifies on the basis of Artist and Production). This kind of system is entirely in keeping with a musical nationalism that relies on simple identification of the performer or song as Canadian. Canadian content regulations label material “Canadian” based on the nationality of the creator. Matters such as lyrical references or musical style play no role in this classification system.

The introduction of Canadian content on radio in 1971 marks, in many ways, the entrance of music into cultural policy. The intention of the policy was to ensure a Canadian presence on radio, and this has itself been a political matter. Canadian content regulation—although solidly enshrined in Canada’s cultural policy and, in many quarters, viewed as successful—has at times generated controversy, as well as considerable opposition, especially from broadcasters who must abide by the regulations. A Fraser Institute study suggests that the policy is inherently “anti-American” and a restraint on freedom of expression.30 Bryan Adams and his manager, Bruce Allen, in a dispute with the CRTC over the non-qualification of his hit single “Everything I Do (I Do It for You),” suggested that the policy simply fostered mediocrity by protecting Canadian artists from real competition.31

Yet the policy has generally thrived, albeit in the increasingly limited world of radio broadcasting. Even broadcasters wishing to limit its application have not suggested abandoning it, as it has become a potent symbol of Canadian cultural nationalism. Musicians, record companies, and others involved in the
music industry have had varied attitudes to the regulations. Adams is perhaps one of the few who have been actively hostile to the policy, but other musicians, including Anne Murray, Gordon Lightfoot, and Bruce Cockburn, have at times expressed ambivalence about the regulations and the way in which they seem to privilege nationality over individual artistic identity.32 Here we see music in relation to politics not so much as a means of expression but as an issue in its own right, subject to political deliberations and the policies that they generate. In this case, it is the tacit assumption that music is an important means of national expression that must be fostered.

Political disputes over music’s production have also emerged relatively recently in the attempt to revise Canadian copyright laws. The issue here has been less one of nationalism (although it has been invoked by some involved in the debate) than of access to music and control over its circulation. In December 2007, just as the Conservative government was about to introduce legislation to amend the Copyright Act and to substantially restrict Canadians’ ability to download and upload music on the Internet, public protests at Industry Minister Jim Prentice’s constituency office and the growth of a substantial online protest through Facebook alerted the public and the government to the level of opposition to these measures.33

The bill was shelved for six months and the controversy was renewed with its reintroduction in June 2008.34 Many perceived the bill as the government’s attempt to appease US-based copyright holders at the expense of Canadian Internet users.35 Again, music was at issue in this dispute. Musicians and listeners involved themselves in the debate through various means, motivated not by any particular piece of music but by music more generally. The debate was also inflected by nationalism. Both Jim Prentice and Canadian Heritage Minister Josée Verner appeared at the 2008 Juno Awards ceremony (the Canadian music industry’s major gala) to affirm their support for copyright and, by implication, the music industry.

This was hardly the first time politicians had done so but it was an unusual gesture for a government not noted at the time for reaching out to Canadian cultural industries. Some Canadian recording artists called for a “Made in Canada” solution, as opposed to the measures in the bill supported by major multinational labels.36 Evidence of Canadians’ involvement in the issue was also apparent during the government’s consultations with the public on copyright during the summer of 2009. From July 20 to September 13, the
government accepted letters from any and all who wished to express their opinions on copyright. In addition, the government held a series of nine public round tables on the issue across the country, as well as three town hall meetings (in Vancouver, Montreal, and Toronto) with simultaneous electronic forums. All this was announced and reported through a government website. Participation seems to have been relatively high. During six weeks of what is generally a quiet season for politics, the site received several thousand letters, the round-table discussions were generally well attended, and the town halls seem to have attracted a large number of participants.

Canadians had to wait until June 2010 to see the resulting legislation, Bill C-32. In most respects, it was substantially the same as its predecessors. Unauthorized downloading and uploading of cultural goods such as music would be rendered definitively illegal. The only sign of any concession toward consumers was that it was somewhat clearer in spelling out consumers’ rights with respect to intellectual property. As the bill moved toward its second reading, all of the opposition parties announced their misgivings about it. The Liberal Party felt that the bill remained too ambiguous in terms of its language. The NDP was more critical, suggesting that the bill did little to address the needs of individual artists and creators, and was aimed primarily at satisfying the requirements of “major media corporations.” This was also the view of a number of arts organizations.

Nonetheless, all parties voted to keep the bill alive as it went to committee hearings. This is the furthest that any attempt at Canadian copyright revision has progressed in the last decade, but like its two predecessors, the bill died on the order paper as the government fell in the spring of 2011. While it remains to be seen when the new Harper majority will introduce the legislation again, their majority government makes it quite likely that we will finally see an updated Copyright Act in the next couple of years.

Criticism of the government’s plans for copyright reform may not constitute one of the top priorities for any of the opposition parties, but for at least one new political party in Canada, it is absolutely central—a sign perhaps that access to music and other cultural goods is, for at least some Canadians, a key political issue. The Pirate Party of Canada was founded over the summer of 2009 with the goal of rebalancing Canada’s intellectual property and information laws away from what they see as the bias toward corporate interests; it received official party status in the spring of 2010. The relative youth of the
Pirate Party’s leadership should perhaps encourage those who bemoan the lack of political engagement by the young.

That said, the party’s platform is remarkably narrow by any standard, dealing exclusively such issues as copyright, patents, privacy, and net neutrality. This in itself may suggest the degree to which online activity has emerged as a species of citizenship. Clearly, this goes beyond concern with ready access to cheap (or free) music. But in the media’s coverage of the party, and indeed, of the copyright issue in general, reporters most often turn to the music industry for responses to such assertions of consumer rights. It seems as though music is the field in which the divergent interests of creators, owners, and consumers can be most clearly delineated and where spokespersons for each are most readily located.

The Conservative government’s decision to cut programs such as PromArt and Trade Routes is yet another instance in which music, among other arts, became an object of politics. The reasons offered by sympathetic journalists for the cutting of these programs, such as the leftist or vaguely subversive character of some of the recipients, suggested that the government might be playing partisan politics with arts funding. This accusation seemed credible in light of its 2007 attempt to control tax credits for film and television projects based on their conforming to government policy. Whatever the government’s intentions for a certain portion of the population, support for Canadian culture, including music, was deemed an important element of government policy, and it put Harper’s Conservatives into direct conflict with many members of Canada’s musical community, both artists and others involved in the industry. Harper’s comments on the issue, which we quoted near the beginning of this chapter, did nothing to dispel the impression that his government did not value music or other culture very highly.

The suggestion that this perception actually had consequences for his electoral fortunes is yet more evidence that music can, on occasion, constitute an important political issue in its own right. But even in these cases, we can still see some distance maintained between music and politics. Interestingly, the resulting protest has taken a number of forms—op-ed pieces, press releases, Facebook pages, media interviews, and letters to the editor. In the case of the funding cuts, a YouTube video released during the 2008 federal election by a Québec musician discussing his grant rejection also served to focus attention on the Conservative government’s lack of understanding of the community.
Likewise, in the federal election of spring 2011, political comment on the part of musicians came most often in non-musical form. Arcade Fire’s somewhat oblique criticism of the Harper government and exhortation to vote was issued as a communiqué on their website, not as a song. Broken Social Scene guitarist Andrew White painted “Vote Harper Out Now” on his guitar for the band’s performance at the 2011 Juno Awards but there were no political songs as such from the band. In Canada, most political activities on the part of musicians came mainly in such prosaic forms rather than as music. Even they, it seems, might believe that putting their case in terms of music might diminish its effectiveness.

Conclusions

Music follows a complex relationship with politics in Canada. Although it remains a relatively minor element of political communication, an examination of the manner in which it appears may nonetheless be informative about certain aspects of Canadian politics. Music’s role as a marker of identity, both to unite and to divide, may be particularly problematic for politics in a country that not only has profound regional divisions but also has embraced official multiculturalism. In the Canadian context, what political power music does possess appears, paradoxically, to derive from seeming to exist outside politics. It is not that music and politics have nothing to do with one another, but in Canada, but they maintain a formal distance. This is so for Stephen Harper’s performance, for music’s use in national events such as the Olympic opening ceremonies, or for complaints over cuts to funding programs.

Music remains largely an accoutrement in the communication of Canadian politics, not a focus. Stephen Harper’s performance at the National Arts Centre Gala, in its rarity, its diffidence, and, indeed, its peculiar effectiveness, but also in its ultimate triviality, remains emblematic of music’s involvement in Canadian politics. Does his performance signal a newfound support for music’s importance? Probably not. Although he seems to enjoy music, it is hard to see it making much of an impact on his politics. This incident will likely not go down in history as a political event of tremendous importance. Given the concern over youth disaffection with mainstream politics, it might seem that music may offer a venue for their involvement. Campaigns such
as Rock the Vote in the United States have attempted to use music stars as a means to interest youth in the political process through events and commercials, with varying results. Similar programs in Canada, such as Rush the Vote, have had a much more limited profile and little, if any, discernible impact on youth participation in politics. It is difficult to assess the precise reasons for this lack of success, but it may be that the distance between politics and music applies here too. It is too easy to dissociate the music from the message, and there is no particular reason why youth would be more willing to take the advice of musicians over that of anybody else on this matter.

Politics’ encounters with music in Canada occur more frequently around music than in music. Music as an object of political expression—from the government side, in terms of policy, or from the side of the populace or artists, such as the activism around copyright issues—tells us that music can be the focus of political activity. This issue is also political and divisive: it creates new identities and groups oriented toward positions within music’s cycle of production, distribution, and consumption. This is a way in which the distance between the two is maintained. We may bemoan musicians’ marginality, but we are equally anxious to preserve music from what we perceive as political interference, as the above policy examples suggest. We acknowledge that government policies affect the means by which music is produced and consumed in this country, but our concerns over limits on our capacity to make or consume music can be political issues for us. In this way, the two spheres may have a great deal to do with one another in Canada, even while our music is seldom political and our politics almost never musical.

NOTES
3 Andrew Mayeda and David Akin, “PM Slams Quebec Arts Community; Protests Over Cuts Fail to ‘Resonate with Ordinary People,’” National Post, September 24, 2008.
9 “P.C Candidate Turns Up the Heat with ‘Let’s Work Together,’” The Northern Light, August 26, 2008.
11 The ad, titled “Arrogance,” has been removed from the Internet.
21 Testa and Shedden, “In the Great Midwestern Hardware Store.”
22 Jackson, “Peace, Order and Good Songs,” 29.
23 Ibid., 25.


Street, “Rock, Pop and Politics,” 252.


Wright, “Dream, Comfort, Memory, Despair.”


Kate Taylor, “Can Copyright Bill Survive with All Its Kinks?” Globe and Mail, October 7, 2010.


Frank Appleyard, “Celebrities Put In Their Two Cents: Canada’s Politicians Face the Music,” Calgary Herald, April 9, 2011.
46 Straw, “In and Around Canadian Music.”