Quebec’s #casseroles: on participation, percussion and protest

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Every night around 8pm, in neighborhoods across Montreal and Quebec, you can hear the din of clanging pots and pans in manifs casseroles (manif is short for manifestation en cours, a street protest). About a block from our home in Montreal’s Villeray neighborhood, at the intersection of Jarry and St-Denis—one of the major epicenters—our local manif begins with people crossing in the crosswalks, banging loudly and rhythmically. We see neighbors and people from local businesses, families with small children, elderly and retired people, working adults, and many students.

Sometimes a manif casserole sounds like random banging, but most I’ve experienced leave sheer raucous pounding for moments when one march meets up with another, or when someone on a balcony does something particularly cool to cheer on the marchers. A rhythm usually arises from the chaos, encircling the disorder and enveloping everyone. Sometimes the rhythms connect with chants like "la loi spéciale, on s’en càlisse," which roughly translates to "we don’t give a fuck about your special law."

Eventually, the numbers grow, and then all of a sudden, as if by magic or intuition, we stand in the middle of the intersection, blocking traffic. The police have taken to simply routing traffic away from the protest. Eventually, we march south on St-Denis toward other neighborhoods (the exact route varies), often swelling into a giant parade of thousands, or as E.P. Thompson might suggest, a parody of a formal state procession, announcing the “total publicity of disgrace” for its subject. ( “Rough Music Reconsidered,” 6, 8).

The numbers are part of the politics. For the last 100-odd days most Quebec students have been on strike against tuition increases of over 70% in five years. Some protests have numbered in the hundreds of thousands. The Quebec government tried to suppress the student movement by passing Bill 78 on May 18, 2012. Among its many preposterous provisions, any spontaneous gathering of over 50 people is illegal without prior police approval—even a picnic. Protesters not only must disclose their planned route, but also their means of transportation. According to Law 78, people are criminals the minute they join a protest, which is why so many people have taken to the streets.
21st Century Charivari

In a piece I co-authored with Natalie Zemon Davis for the Globe and Mail, we connected the casseroles with a 700-year-old Francophone tradition of charivari. In English, the tradition is called “rough music”; there are also Italian, German and Spanish versions and the practice has spread from Europe throughout its former colonies. Groups of disguised young men would meet up at night and bang on pots and pans and make a grand din outside an offender’s home. Usually the offense was against some heterosexual norm, but they sometimes took on a political character, and older people would join in. As Allan Greer has shown in The Patriots and the People, they played an important role in Lower Canada’s failed rebellion of 1837–8, where charivaris greeted British officials who would not surrender their commissions (252–57).

In the French tradition, charivaris were (usually) an alternative to violence on occasions where community reparation was possible. Charivaris were largely inclusive, as the subjects of harassment were usually allowed to return to good standing after paying some type of fine. This history may well have resounded in Jacques Attali’s ears when he described music is a simulacrum of violence in Noise: “the game of music resembles the game of power: monopolize the right to violence; provoke anxiety and then provide a feeling of security; provoke disorder and then propose order; create a problem in order to solve it” (28).

Of course, the broader multinational traditions of rough music have no guaranteed politics. Pots and pans were sometimes heard before lynchings in the American South, but also as improvised instruments for black musicians in New Orleans’ public squares. John Mowitt has even suggested that rough music is one of the cultural roots of the drummer’s trap kit, that backbone of rock and jazz music.

In the 20th century, varieties of rough music largely moved from domestic concerns to political protest, though again without guarantees. Rough music has greeted bank failures in Latin America and—most recently—Iceland; it was the sound of Spanish citizens opposed to their government’s involvement in the 2003 Iraq war. In Chile, protesters used pots and pans to protest Allende in the early 1970s, and later to protest Pinochet in the mid-1980s.

The casseroles thus have symbolic roots in charivari, but of course they are also creatures of social media and the particularities of Quebec culture and politics. A popular 2003 Loco Locass song “Libérez-nous des libéraux” (“Liberate Us From the Liberals”), written for the provincial election, mentions a charivari for Quebec’s liberal party.

And, as the student movement has already demonstrated, the protest cultures here are extremely vital. While New York’s May Day Parade was happy to attract tens of thousands in a metropolitan area of over ten million, participation here can be counted in the hundreds of thousands for a region with three million.

Rhythm and Participation

We need to listen to the casseroles protests to understand them. They are, after all, embodied acts in the old-fashioned sense, performed loudly and defiantly by people in the streets. They have a politics of volume and frequency, as well as rhythm.
In *Percussion*, Mowitt writes: “there is something extraordinary about the importance of beating, of creating a specifically percussive din … as though a distinctly sonoric response was called for when a breach in the community’s self-perception was at issue” (98). Rhythmic participation in the casseroles is a kind of political involvement, and participation of various kinds plays a role in most of the positive political visions associated with music.

“Participation is the opposite of alienation,” wrote Charlie Keil in his essay “Participatory Discrepancies and the Power of Music”, and his account of music as a social process in “Motion and Feeling through Music” helps us better understand the casseroles’ particular combination of clangor and rhythm. Writing amidst massive changes in the 1960s, Keil challenged prevailing theories of musical affect, like Leonard Meyer’s, which assumed that musical meaning was lexical and syntactic, contained in melody and harmony. While Meyer attempted to draw universal conclusions about emotion from Western Art Music and its attendant values, Keil derived his theory of musical affect from African-American traditions like blues and jazz. Against the ideals of concert hall perfection and rational mastery, Keil—along with writers such as Christopher Small, Leroi Jones, and Steven Feld—argued that music should be understood as action. Thus, Small coined the term “musicking,” describing music not as a collection of rarefied texts performed by experts and professionals, but rather as a field of social action that includes all participants, from musicians to the people cleaning up after the event.

By the 1980s, Keil specified the affective power of music through its “participatory discrepancies,” the mixture of groove on one hand, and timbre and texture on the other (96): “music, to be personally and socially valuable, must be ‘out of time’ and ‘out of tune.’” Over the minutes and hours, the casseroles sway in and out of both, as people join and exit, and as the procession happens to each new block. Because of their unique musical character, the nightly manifs casseroles are profoundly inclusive. They are in many ways closer to the utopian ideals of collective musicking one finds in Keil and Small’s work, and that of Attali’s “composition,” than the so-called digital revolution in musical instruments. They are also good fun, as any child will tell you.

Despite Anglophone press caricatures that recast the protests as the product of entitled, rabble-rousing students, the casseroles transcend differences that often structure local politics--like language, class, and race--as well as gender and age, which can present barriers in music-making (especially drumming) in addition to politics. Because the instruments are simple, cheap and improvised, almost anyone can join. Because the music is deliberately non-professional, the ideals of mastery and perfection and the weighty gendered and aged assumptions about who can be a “good musician” are inoperative. The beats are easy to pick up and play in time—and if you swing a little out there, all the better. I have heard skilled drummers syncopate catchy rhythms on single drums or cymbals, but most people are content to simply move in and out of time with everyone else. (My partner and I join with maracas and an otherwise-rarely-used buffalo drum—I am a bassist at heart—though we offer guests pots and pans).

Taken together, volume and frequency work to immerse some in its proximal footprint, while hailing others at a distance. The sheer power and volume for someone inside a casseroles protest is hard to convey. My neighbor on a pot is a lot like my drummer hitting a cymbal. The transient (the sharp, initial part of the hit) can be piercing at close range due to frequencies at the very top of the audible range traveling at a high sound pressure level (this is why drummers often lose their hearing faster than guitarists). Inside the casseroles march, our ears are percussed with every hit; many people show up wearing earplugs.
The frequencies dull a bit farther away, and the more pitched sounds of the casseroles tickle the ear’s center of hearing in a gentler cacophony that is both declarative and invitational. Since the point of the protests is to audibly flout Law 78, the fact that they can be heard much further than they can be seen helps make this law-breaking an expressly public and political act. Montreal mayor Gerard Tremblay acknowledged as much: “They can stay on their balconies to make noise. I’m in Outremont [a wealthy enclave next to Mile End and the Plateau, another epicenter of the protests] and I can hear it. No need to go onto the street, to walk around and paralyze Montreal.”

The volume’s territorial reach also works as an invitation to join in, either by banging along on one of Montreal’s ubiquitous porches, or by entering the procession itself. While at the other end of the frequency spectrum from Steve Goodman’s “bass materialism,” it affords some of the “collective construction of a vibrational ecology” he describes in Sonic Warfare (196), as the whole of the pots and pans becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

Participants’ overwhelming response to the casseroles has been a kind of weighty sentimentality, an outpouring of emotion and relief. One can hear it in the viral video that has been making rounds:

And one can see it in letters like this one to the editors of Le Devoir:

Now people greet and talk. Now neighborhood meetings, discussions, vigils start up casually among neighbors on the steps and balconies of Montreal. The neighborhood will be less and less alien. This is a true political victory!

We should repeat this friendly beating [the evocation of tapage doesn’t quite work as well in English] possibly in other forms, until the land is occupied by neighbors who recognize one another, encounter one another each day by chance, and have known one another over the years. That is how we live in a place, that is how we become citizens.

My heart swells with joy.

Because “the clashing of pots and pans […] is so blatantly percussive, it is hard not to hear in the retributive structure of rough music something like a beating back—a backbeat, in short, or a response on the part of the community to what it perceives as a provocation, a call to act,” writes Mowitt (98). The connections to charivari matter: the casseroles protests are local, neighborhood, community movements asking for a simple redress—the repeal of a heinous law. Of course there are many other resonances: signs can be seen challenging various aspects of neoliberalism alongside symbols of Quebec nationalism (which, I must remind Anglophone Canadians, is not automatically separatist). In my neighborhood, people collect food donations.

When we recently spoke about the differences between student activists in the 1960s and now, my former teacher Lawrence Grossberg pointed to the central role of music in the 1960s. Those movements had songs that everyone knew, and through which shared affect grew. Like many other observers, he doesn’t see music playing the same role today (perhaps supplanted by a wider range of media practices, as the usual story goes).

Apart from viral videos and the revivified Loco Locass tune, I’m not sure the current Quebec movement has unifying songs.

But it certainly has a groove we can move to.
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