

Sounding Ethnography

Mutuality and Diversity in Musical Life

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Sounding Ethnography: Mutuality and Diversity in Musical Life (Workshop 027)

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Sounding Ethnography: Mutuality and Diversity in Music
(Introductory Paper)

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1. Introduction

Let us begin by briefly explaining how we have conceived of the phrase “sounding ethnography”. The encounter with the non-verbal and sensuous phenomenon of musical sound and its role in world cultures has been subject to professional academic study for about one hundred years. Great paradigm shifts have followed general changes such as postcolonialism and poststructuralism. Today, a major challenge in the cultural study of music is to re-situate it discursively while recognizing its trajectories across social domains, art forms, and academic disciplines. The historical focus on language and vision in anthropology and other fields of study has limited our understanding of music. The recent interest in sonic practices outside the specialized domains of music studies coincides with a broader debate about the senses. As Veit Erlmann argues in his book *Hearing Cultures* (2004), the privileging of logos, language, and vision in modernity have been criticized at length.

We understand the metaphor “sounding ethnography” in a double sense: First, culture has a sonic dimension. Sound plays a constitutive role in everyday life and in human communication. Conversely, auditory practices are a fundamental part of human experience. Music, more specifically, has the capacity to express and represent more than the aesthetic and sensual experience itself. Music embodies culture; it embodies cultural difference. In this sense, music is sounding culture.

The second meaning implied in our use of the phrase is related to how this reality is studied and represented ethnographically. How worlds of music and sound can be sounded in ethnographic practice. Musical experience has unique qualities and opens up ways for understanding other aspects and situations in social life than those of the musical moment itself. It is the contingency and materiality of expressive culture that help us to understand how individual genres of expression such as music and visual art are embedded in a social reality. These genres should not be considered as separate domains. Individual art forms employ different senses, and their materialities are different. No art form, however, can be limited to one sense. The notion of the senses is a modern invention. It is a product of the philosophical discourse of Western European modernity (Connor 2004).

There are other reasons why anthropologists would want to reconsider the role of expressive culture and to look beyond boundaries of art forms. Expressive culture, and especially the commercial products of the cultural industries are ubiquitous in social life. They transform the human condition and create new subjectivities. Post-industrial societies around the world are increasingly based on immaterial forms such as knowledge, electronic information, and cultural products such as art and fashion. The anthropologist is constantly confronted with a heavy flow of images, texts, videos, and interactive computer-mediated communication.

Our focus in this paper will be on ethnography of multi-sensory experiences of music in social space. Large in scope, this raises the issue of boundaries between music cultures and genres that are regulated in processes of specialization and rationalization of cultural production. The social fluidity of modernity has created new spaces of hybridity, but there are also new divisive forces such as postmodern cultural hierarchies and the corporate logic of reductive categorization (Gendron 2002, Holt 2007b). Ethnomusicologists have voiced important postcolonial criticisms of separating and dispersing sounds from their sources (cf. Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000, Chernoff 2002, Connell and Gibson 2004, Stokes 2004).

One way of moving from theoretical to experienced ontologies, and in this sense toward a more grounded multi-sensory approach to music, is to look at how and where people engage with music. We can distinguish between music in mediated forms and in live performances, as part of a cultural context at particular sites, or as rituals of agency. Performance is by its nature very context-specific and affected by changing social and cultural conditions. Here, an engagement with the difference between mutuality and unity can stimulate new critical approaches to cultural challenges in global space. Mutuality can be viewed as an alternative to reductive ideas about cultural unity and cultural identity. Unity and identity, which literally refer to the notion of sameness, have frequently been forged. These metaphors, moreover, have been strategically constructed in response to anxieties about otherness and in the attempt to maintain unequal power relations. All of this is at odds with social relations based on mutuality.

Mutuality grows from ethics of trust and intimacy, as well as social engagement. In this respect, mutuality is an important concept to understanding social health, and it has great relevance in a

world in which social relations are conditioned by global economies and by disembodied technologies. Such forces create fragmented social dynamics in which individuals or groups of people who are living in the same area can be isolated from each other. Fabian Holt has argued that this can be seen in the struggle over national socialism in Germany and elsewhere. This struggle is negotiated between social groups who don't understand each other and have partially lost hope in mainstream society with which they have only remote contact and little mutual understanding. This led Holt to conceive of the term "ethnographic anxiety" (Holt 2007a), and he contends that the same structural problem exists in such issues as war and terrorism on the global political stage and the global community's inability to act on global warming.

Following these general introductory remarks, we would now like to address the theme of mutuality and diversity in musical life in three sections with an overarching systematic: The first section considers music at particular sites and venues. The second music in society, and the third section considers music in spatially and temporally fragmented media spaces.

2. Mutuality and Diversity of Music at Particular Sites

We find it important to contemplate issues of the multi-sensory because cultural products such as sound recordings and or digital images are continuously juxtaposed or combined in cultural practices of the modern world. One way of avoiding the reductive claim that everything is theatre is to focus on the drama that unfolds among particular groups of people. Our concept of drama is deeply influenced by Victor Turner's classic study *From Ritual to Theatre* (1974) in which he famously explored the dynamics between drama in theatre and drama in society. In a word, Turner argued that the two have a complex relationship. Dramas of social life are negotiated in art, and the dramas in art shape social dynamics and social styles.

The concepts of drama and ritual in anthropology developed in relation to folk and religious rituals. In contemporary post-industrial societies, such rituals have partly disappeared and been replaced by rituals of a different character. First of all, the context is very different in a society with a flow of cultural commodities, modern technologies, and different modes of production.

Turner's theory of rituals and everyday life helps us understand how rituals have changed and in some ways been replaced by other cultural categories. One such category in contemporary discourse is the "cultural event", which involves notions of immediacy, site-specific spectacles, and media presence. The logic of the cultural event has transformed traditional family rituals such as weddings and funerals and led to the formation of a wide range of commercially oriented rituals such as marketing events, receptions, corporate social events, or tourist ventures at luxury cruise ships. Such changes can also be registered in popular music concert life. Many concert venues have loosened up their music programming from a focus on particular cultural or musical profiles toward more individualized events.

Concert productions, moreover, frequently take the form of package shows, with two or three bands performing on the same night. This means that each band sometimes only plays one set, and that obviously limits the ritual process of the concert. The ritual curve is simply shorter. For instance, it usually takes a while before the audience has tuned in and connects with the band, and the development toward a ritual climax cannot be rushed. The result is a spread of a concert form at which bands pretend to be enthusiastic from beginning to end, with less time to breathe and allow for more natural dynamic curves. The concert industry has had much success in the past couple of years, but the specificities of such social experiences need to be taken seriously because they are the reasons audiences care to pay for a show instead of just listening to the downloaded file.

3. Mutuality and Diversity of Music in Society

Music has multiple roles in society that change in relation to time and place. On islands in the southwest Indian Ocean, for example, specific forms of music are strongly linked to the remembrance of a colonial past, as Carsten Wergin has argued (Wergin 2008). Depending on the place where they are performed (tourist events, local bars, or private festivals), such music is always played a little differently. These "polyphonic" ways in which the social realities of these places are represented today are due to different reasons. One is the fact that most island populations built their histories on a violent past of slavery, deportation and exile. In course of their distinct

forms of Creolisation, they have also ‘creolised’ music traditions brought by various people from various cultural settings. These have resulted in a mix of musical forms that represent not only developments of a cultural tradition. In recent years, the World Music market has “rediscovered” musical traditions for global audiences and marketed them to meet their “exotic” expectations (Feld 2000).

Triggered through international corporate interests, political tensions, or sheer expenditure in tourist arrivals, this has led to significant social and cultural transformations. These cannot only be witnessed in post- or neocolonial environments, but also at music festivals across the globe. As the protagonist of the musical *Tommy* by The Who suggests, several sensory modes are employed in the perception of music performances at such sites. Numerous agents at Sziget in Budapest, Roskilde near Copenhagen, or the “Karnerval der Kulturen (KdK)” in Berlin create translocal soundscapes in which people communicate and mix socio-economic, political, cultural and aesthetic ideas about themselves and others. How an audience perceives of these places cannot be grasped solely in terms of tradition, transnationality or cultural difference. Such perception is fundamentally linked to multilayered visual and sonic aestheticizations.

Since its emergence in 1996, the “Karneval der Kulturen” has become a popular place for ethnomusicology research, which has been proven in numerous seminars, publications and the participation of scientists in its organizing committee. Its musical range includes representations of Malagasy folklore as well as reproductions of Bavarian brass band tradition. It also provides a multidimensional picture of urban subcultures. In groups of 30 to 300 people, many younger visitors of the carnival dance behind bombastic sound systems. Such musical enactments are related to scientific paradigms, globalisation, migration and social reordering inspired by the famous “Reclaim the Street”. Music and its audience play with identity markers of “street life” and fantasies of a transcultural society beyond “imagined communities” (Anderson 1991). Sound, music and place at the KdK form an overarching context of crucial social, political and economic importance, for example in the fields of tourism, urban development and integration.



Everybody down...

And up...

“Audience participation during a percussion performance at KdK 2008” (Photos C.W., all rights reserved).

If one is to take the *Leitmotiv* of a unified Europe seriously, *in varietate concordia* (“united in diversity”), it remains questionable to what extent its foundations are not solely based on political ideals and guidelines. In the spirit of this conference, and our arguments in this paper, one might in fact argue whether the proverb is best reframed as *mutuality in diversity*. Ethnographic research into the musical mutuality and diversity can substantially contribute to the development of new means and methods in order to grasp the experience of such translocal soundscapes.

4. Mutuality and Diversity in Electronically Mediated Music

In the past couple of decades, media and information technologies have been recognized as important topics in anthropology. Anthropologists have started to explore the cultural dimensions of media from a wide range of perspectives (Askew and Wilk 2002, Ginsburg et al. 2002). Anthropology has historically been sceptical of media as one of the technologies of Western modernity that would lead to a “cultural grey-out” and disembody human relations (Hayles 1999, Stokes 2004). The possibilities opened up by new media have mainly been explored in media studies. Digital media and user-friendly software have made it possible for everyone with a computer to produce their own multi-media products and share them globally. Multi-media has become much more widespread over the past decade, from the emergence of multi-functional mobile phones to PowerPoint in education, video in interactive online media, or Web 2.0 and 3.0.

But the current realities of the Internet, which is the dominant medium in so-called information and network societies (Castells 2000), also point in different directions. On the one hand, the Internet was fully privatized in the mid-1990s and is not regulated by any authority. This creates opportunities for cheap and fast long-distance communication. P2P technology is a typical example of the newly democratized and de-centralized forms of computer-mediated communication. On the other hand, the Internet has also become a huge domain of financial investment with great power given to major Internet service providers. Moreover, the convergence of digital media content with multinational corporations in fact creates a centralized and highly regulated flow of information and cultural products. It should be mentioned that the simultaneity of positive and negative developments were witnessed in the first collective effort in the study of music and technology in ethnomusicology. A pre-conference titled “music and technology” was organized in 1995 in Los Angeles, and it resulted in the publication of an edited volume in 2003 (Gay and Lysloff 2003).

To understand the inequalities that are invisible to many, including those excluded from global networks, it becomes necessary to develop media spheres with space for cultural mutuality and diversity, and a more equal distribution of knowledge, technology, and capital. The fact remains that the G-8 countries account for the majority of high-technology manufacturing of the total market capitalization values. In 1998, 85% of the world’s population only accounted for 7% of the total market capitalization value (Castells 2000: 132). These realities are strongly reflected in music, media and communication technologies. Fundamental issues in the anthropology of music include questions of access, commodification, and conditions of circulation in diverse networks, from the corporate sphere of Apple’s iTunes to the grassroots spheres in P2P networks. Related to this is the disappearance of physical objects, such as the CD or the album cover in musical contexts. Electronic representations loosen the physicality of musical idioms and lead those to take on more fluid ontologies. Therefore, along with media convergence is a concurrent process of convergence between genres of cultural production that involves de-specialization among producers. New inter- and post-disciplinarity in academia should respond to these developments.

5. Preliminary Conclusions

In this paper, we have tried to outline general ideas about mutuality and diversity in music based on our research experience. We contend that such global issues need to be explored from particular sites and moments in a broad comparative perspective. Mutuality and diversity are global issues that exist under different social conditions and are negotiated differently in each society. As anthropologists, we continue to learn from such translocal analysis.

In this perspective, we are very pleased with the quality and variety of the individual papers of this panel. All of the papers raise questions of broad comparative interest in addition to broadening our understanding of the richness of musical and social life around the world. This challenges ethnographic writing about particular performance sites, where various groups of people create and experience imagined worlds, in particular venues and geographical contexts. Christoph Brunner shows how Dubstep, as a recent descendant of roots-related and dub-based music, describes a cultural phenomenon in the lineage of the “Black Atlantic” (Gilroy 1987). As a hybrid music style, Dubstep becomes an intersection between, ethnicities, social classes and mutational forms of creativity. In his analysis, Brunner highlights the conceptual trajectories of difference and mutuality to emphasize the potential for micro-political forms of creativity and resistance through music. Such, what he calls, “ecologies of practice” comprise networks of artistic production, consumption and communication that broaden the often too narrow contexts of social sciences and transcend these fixtures into non-hierarchical modes of cultural production.

In her example of “Russendisko”, Tirza de Fockert explores how musicians both use and redefine an idea of Russianness in Berlin music clubs. She asks where German longing for Russianness comes from, and how the secluded space of a musical event can allow for the exploration of issues such as collective memory, identity, and implicit social knowledge of a problematic shared past. In this context, another very secluded space is the opera. Vlado Kotnik, in his paper describes how such a place, determined by the venue, music scene, urban structure, but also collective memory, cultural tradition and related mutual consent, reveals the specificity of the role opera plays in diverse spaces.

Whilst most empirical studies of artists' encounters and the development of 'fusion' music are based on bottom-up musical formations, Marie-Pierre Gibert focuses on the top-down dimension of a planned musical encounter and challenge to cultural stereotypes in the musical experience of a residency of Arab and British musicians in the United Kingdom. She investigates the ways in which this event produced musical creation and individual relations from below. Catherine Baker puts greater emphasis on the mutuality involved in forming part of an audience at a musical performance. She argues, that this offers a way to experience Croatian nationhood. This is contrasted by Ioannis Tsioulakis's description of the ability to shift between performative sites in Athens, from popular music clubs to small jazz venues. This allows for the construction of a musical identity balanced between the experienced locality and the imaginary of globality. Finally, Kristin McGee explores symbolic constructions and mobile sites, as well as musical contributions of two prominent, international touring instrumentalists, Candy Dulfer and Sheila E. Those have prominently contributed to a variety of crossover musical projects and their performances have continually reflected developments in contemporary jazz and popular music within the context of an increasingly mass mediated and transnational music world.

Such encounters of ethnographers in particular field sites are key to a "sounding ethnography" which maintains a focus on fundamental methodological practices and allows us to confront the ways in which issues of mutuality and diversity play out in different places around the world.

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