

# Do We Still Need To Think Musically? (Musings about an Old Friend, Fishing Nets, Templates, and Much More)<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

In what is deliberately *not* a typical scholarly paper, I muse on why we may need to move beyond thinking about 'music' in its various, established disciplinary manifestations within traditional scholarly discourse, towards new and braver conceptualisations. While 'music' remains an entrenched term in everyday life, the academic discourse needs better tools that take into account the sonic action and impact of music/sounds across a variety of trajectories and domains currently not served fully and comprehensively by our scholarly frames.

**Keywords:** music(ologies), ontologies, definitions and categorisations, sonic action.

"If Reality is a creative process,  
its conceptual reproduction as knowledge is not a new process  
but a component of the process itself.  
In acting, men do not act on Reality,  
but participate in the activity that is Reality."  
(Gordon Childe 1956:129)

## Re-Framing Addiction

"We cut nature up, organize it into concepts,  
and ascribe significances as we do largely  
because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way,  
an agreement that holds throughout our speech community  
and is codified in the patterns of our language."  
(Benjamin L. Whorf 1940: 229-31).

I once had a friend who firmly believed in the importance of looking at things, and people, from as many angles as possible, reacting to the most diverse situations. In keeping with his credo, whenever he was getting serious about a lady, he would arrange a car excursion, and then simulate an engine breakdown, in the middle of the countryside (preferably during a rainstorm). The idea was to observe how she would react under such trying circumstances. Unsurprisingly, he never got married.

I never personally indulged in this kind of experiment, but the idea of changing angle of observation, or the conditions under which the observation takes place, stuck with me. I am not sure that explains why I never married myself. It certainly explains, I believe, why in the course of my professional life I never "married", or even pledged allegiance, to any kind of "ology". Probably because the habit of switching angles of observation, of reframing the context of sonic experiences, turned out to be, for me, quite addictive.

Addictive or not, is it gainful? I believe so. Take, for instance, how we categorize creative work as either "art" or "science".<sup>2</sup> This dichotomous view (not fully established until late into the nineteenth century) creates at least one problem: what do we do with activities that fall in between; for example,

mathematics? Is it really a science in the sense that physics is, or biology? For one thing, it has nothing to do with experimentation. To be sure, the moment we no longer look at it as something strictly germane to “scientific thinking”, we more easily appreciate the artistic and imaginative quality of its nature.<sup>3</sup> Other forms of intellectual endeavour possess a similar dual nature, being artistic and scientific at the same time (Nisbet 1961; Feyerabend 1983).

Opportunities for shifting viewpoint abound in the domain of music as well; and they do offer insights and new vistas. For instance, it was Heinrich Schenker (1868-1935) who observed how Rameau's theory of harmony was not taken seriously by Bach, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven (Schenker 1973:176). And, of course, none of them knew the theory of harmonic functions, theories which were only developed by Hugo Riemann at the end of the nineteenth century. It is therefore a refreshing experience – hard to practice, but one I recommend – to make the effort to listen to such authors forgetting about chord inversions (conceptualized by Rameau), and forgetting about hierarchical tonal relationships (described by Hugo Riemann). A very different kind of Bach, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven emerge from such mental experiment.<sup>4</sup>

By the same token, it is a common Western reaction, when confronted with the Indonesian Gamelan, to find it monotonous and hypnotic. Of course, once we learn the rules of the game, and experience wonderful performances like those by Sumarsam, then Gamelan appears all but monotonous and hypnotic.<sup>5</sup> Once that understanding is reached, then it is worth going back to Western symphonic music, and look at it from the standpoint of Gamelan. In doing so, one is struck by how the symphony tradition has, for more than two hundred years, embraced the constant use of rather trivial effects such as “pianissimo”, “fortissimo”, “accelerando” and “rallentando”, “crescendo” and “diminuendo”. It surely is one way to avoid monotony, but such a sonic rollercoaster can be quite disturbing from the standpoint of aesthetics that shy away from any blatant form of rhetoric.

A comparison between Western symphonic music and Gamelan, or any other tradition for that matter, also yields opportunities to realize how, once we develop a taste for alien forms of music, our native tradition will not necessarily appear as attractive as it formerly did. It can likewise happen when we master a second language, and absorb the point of view of the culture it relies upon. At that point we become aware of the expressive potential our native language possesses, but equally aware of its limitations. Insofar as languages offer different takes on reality, some of them may yield more poetic, insightful or simply more useful ways of looking at it.

## Templates and Fishing Nets

"Man is an animal suspended in webs of  
significance he himself has spun..."  
(Clifford Geertz 1973: 5-14)

The ideal object for testing how exciting shifting point of observation can be, are mental categories, those we use out of habit and never question. They are nothing less than templates for thinking; the primary means by which we organize our understanding of reality. In an important sense, they are our understanding of it. Here I am not talking about *a priori* categories, those which, according to Emmanuel Kant, exist before experience occurs. On the contrary, I am referring to “cultural categories”, *a posteriori*, that is. All cultures develop their own categories and take them for granted. The mere fact that most of them are not shared and agreed upon cross-culturally, suggests they deserve scrutiny; and maybe even to be replaced by others that promise a better understanding of what we are after.<sup>6</sup> Abandoning, or temporarily setting aside old categories, while experimenting with new ones, is tantamount to drastically changing mode of observation. That is easier to understand if we compare a cultural category to a fisherman's net. If we go out fishing with one than has large meshes, then we get the impression only large fish inhabit the ocean. But the moment we switch to a

net with smaller meshes, we realize this is not at all the case.<sup>7</sup>

Does all that really have much to do with music? I believe so, because in this area we have been using standard-sized fishing nets for a long time; and unlike fishermen, we do not even know exactly what they consist of – because they are next to impossible to define. Paradoxically, discussions and controversies are often about what they ‘really’ mean or ‘should’ mean.<sup>8</sup> That is probably because cultural categories simply emerge in popular discourse and were never meant to be scientific in the first place.<sup>9</sup> Their import is taken to be intuitive – like, for instance, in the case of what we call ‘world music’. In using this label, we essentially rely on an intuitive perception of some sort of East-West-North-South fusion, essentially non-European influenced jazz and/or pop music. That happens as well, with other more or less nebulous conceptualizations such as ‘classical’, ‘jazz’, ‘pop’, ‘rock’.<sup>10</sup> Even the very word ‘music’, which is not by any stretch of the imagination a scientific term, is taken to be self-explanatory, although both history and anthropology show it is not (Sorace Keller 2010).<sup>11</sup> Of course, terminology that does not stem from scientific needs, that is not calibrated to catch specific kinds of “fish”, is not necessarily to be dismissed entirely. No doubt, it offers valuable insights into social history and the history of ideas – but that is, of course, a complementary line of investigation, compatible with the deployment of terms which, unlike those inherited by tradition are, as Max Weber used to say, *Wertfrei* – i.e., that do not carry value-connotations.<sup>12</sup>

## Musicologies Right and Left

Some maintain that such a tendency distorts the curve of tradition.

Do they derive their arguments from the future or the past?

The future does not belong to them, as far as we are aware,  
and one would be singularly ingenuous to seek to measure that which exists  
by that which exists no longer.

(Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, *On Cubism*, 1912, 13-14)

I am encouraged in my compulsive propensity at re-framing events with new categories, by all that is happening today across the very large area of music studies. Few people may have noticed, but we actually live in the Age of Musicologies, and the plural is in order! ‘Normal people’ walking down the street right now, are surely not aware of that; they may not even have ever heard the word ‘musicology’ itself. Not even many practical musicians may have noticed how this word today needs to be used in the plural. They are primarily involved with performing or composing, and are so much into their craft that they seldom pay attention to what scholars say, produce, or discover. And yet, Guido Adler, who at the end of the nineteenth century, surveyed the large territory of music studies, would conceivably be astounded by recent developments.

His plan was very articulate (Adler 1885; Haydon 1941). In practice, university curricula have been less so. They revolved around “historical musicology” and “comparative musicology” which, when I was a graduate student, had recently been renamed “ethnomusicology”. Psychology and sociology of music were never considered essential for the training of music scholars, and remained somewhat in the background; whereas music education and pedagogy were (and still are) not thought to really belong in a musicology department (Edler 1987).<sup>13</sup> Since then, however, music scholarship has widened in scope enormously. This was, in part a response to external stimuli (developments in the social sciences and cultural studies) and, in part, because of needs emerging from its own progress.

Back in 1977, in the USA, the Society of Music Theory was born out of the American Musicological Society, and “music theory” officially became a discipline in its own right. Jazz studies also considerably developed, largely as an independent area. Although ethnomusicologists are often interested in jazz, hard-core jazz scholars did not in the past, nor do many today, feel they ‘belong’ in ethnomusicology (I think, for example, of Joachim Ernst Berendt, James Lincoln Collier, Gunther

Schuller, Frank Tirro or Ted Gioia). Popular music studies also developed by leaps and bounds.<sup>14</sup> Once again, ethnomusicologists frequently investigated popular musics, but dedicated popular music scholars did not in the past, nor do they today, think of themselves as ethnomusicologists (e.g. Charles Hamm, Richard Middleton, Philip Tagg or Franco Fabbri, come to my mind). Now, in addition to music theory, jazz, and popular music studies, we witnessed about thirty years ago the emerging field of Zoomusicology, based on the assumption that it makes sense to extend our purview to the sonic behavior non-human animals (Sorce Keller 2012). Finally we are witnessing today, the emerging fields of Medical Ethnomusicology, Computational Musicology, Ecomusicology, Sound Studies and Ludomusicology.<sup>15</sup>

Why so many ‘musicologies’?<sup>16</sup> The answer to the question I find well expressed by Nicholas Cook, who wrote: “Music is a very small word to encompass something that takes as many forms as there are cultural or subcultural identities... (and) when we speak of music we are really talking about a multiplicity of activities and experiences; it is only the fact that we call them all ‘music’ that makes it seem obvious that they belong together.” (Cook 1998: 5). Philip Bohlman puts it in a different, complementary way: “Fundamental to the ethnomusicologist’s understanding of and passion for music is that music insistently becomes more than itself – music and/in/of culture; music as text/context; music and religion/ritual/the sacred; music and the body/embodyed experience/dance/performance; music and race/racism/the racial imagination; music as everyday/marked experience; music in/out of time; music emplaced/displaced; music experienced through hearing/listening/noise/silence.” (Bohlman 2008) In other words such a complex cluster of forms of behavior we put under the name of “music” could hardly be explored in its entirety by disciplines characterized by only one type of fundamental approach – historical, analytical or anthropological that it may be.

To be sure, the mental representation of periodical vibrations falling within audible range can be investigated with the methods of physics and mathematics first. But between patterns of physical vibration and their mental appreciation, a vast uncharted area lies, which is for physiology, neurology, and psychology to clarify. Then come the music “systems” ethnomusicology so successfully investigated. Finally, what we call “music” is also a form of social interaction (production of sound whose “sense” is understood and shared within a given social milieu) and, in no small measure, an organized human activity that has a cost (in monetary and social terms), and whose products may become commodities to buy, sell, and exchange.

A plurality of musicologies is needed to face the daunting cluster of activities, some of which are more germane to nature than culture, while others more to culture than nature; an extraordinary variety of processes that go way beyond the simple definition of “art”, and whose complexity is actually concealed, rather than highlighted, by the simple word “music”, one which does not even exist in most languages (Sorce Keller 2010).<sup>17</sup> If we think of it as the virtual area where most of the fundamental processes of social life meet and interact – at all times, in all places – we may easily imagine how more musicologies may be needed in the future.

## Hypothetical Musicologies

Got to keep that party movin',  
Just like I told you.  
Kick the old-school joints,  
For the true funk soldiers.  
Musicology!  
(Prince 2004)

If I were young and energetic I would, for example, strongly advocate for a “musicology of the

nascent state” or “genesis musicology”, because I’m fascinated by origins, by where and how things have their beginning. New genres and styles appear all the time, but their “nascent stage” never gets observed, documented and studied in real time. When Punk began to make itself visible, no music scholars rushed on site to witness what was happening. British Dub-Step is by now about twenty years old, and little is known about it in scholarly terms; and it already is too late to gain a first hand understanding of its very beginnings. We know, of course, the historical reasons why musicologists did not rush to New Orleans when jazz was in the cradle. Back then they were affected by the highbrow bias; by residual Romantic attitudes about how art-works prove to be art-works when they withstand the test of time.<sup>18</sup> But now that attitudes have changed, it is too bad that the birth of new traditions, genres or styles should occur undocumented.<sup>19</sup> I wish there was a small community of scholars, ready to be dispatched to intercept, new forms of musicking whenever and wherever they may be happening.<sup>20</sup> And even if eventually nothing really conspicuous develops, where and when it had seemed likely to would be worth understanding just as much. The story of failed styles, genres or traditions could tell us as much about cultural dynamics as successful ones. In sum, I feel it would be advantageous for musicology to be more often where things happen, and more interested in sequences of events than in solidified states of affair.<sup>21</sup>

Another form of musicology I wish would exist is what I could call “terminal-stage musicology”, the study of traditions that go extinct. At the present time, much energy is invested in salvaging endangered traditions (languages, rituals, festivities, musics). And yet, when confronted with the incipient extinction of something, I sense a “divided self”, somewhat like Robert Schumann’s Florestan and Eusebius.<sup>22</sup> The emotional Florestan in me would like to preserve everything; would like to live in the present, fully incorporating the past into it. And yet the more cautious Eusebius feels that preserving everything is not only objectively impossible, but also not necessarily desirable. In the end, the question is whether we should contemplate circumstances, and establish criteria, that help us decide when a cultural practice of any kind could/should be let go, die, and – so to say – rest in peace.

An example from linguistics may help explain the idea, since languages reflect a detailed knowledge of the natural world (weather, animals, plants-particularly their medical uses, etc.), as well as the historical experiences of the people speaking them. When a language is gone, the knowledge embedded in it is gone as well, at least in part. Not many languages leave behind a written body of texts; and when they do, that is more than enough to make us regret we cannot observe them in daily usage – Latin, for example. How wonderful would it be if it could have been preserved and kept “alive” to this day. But had it been, we probably would not have modern Latin-derived languages, such as Italian, Spanish, French, Catalan, Sardinian and Rumantsch – and we would not have Dante, Cervantes...or Proust. I wonder, therefore, whether we should consider that when a language no longer has much to say, when it lingers into a world where it appears less and less functional, might we consider letting it go with few regrets (Austin and Sallabank 2014).

By the same token, it would be phenomenal if we could experience the Isorhythmic Motet or the Madrigal as the living traditions they once were. But there again, had they survived, would it have been possible to have Mozart’s “Don Giovanni”, or “Bitches Brew” by Miles Davis? It is at the very least doubtful, because all that is alive and well, occupies social and mental space taken away from other practices that could conceivably exist. That may be one reason we forget, or let things drop out of fashion. ‘Style Louis XVI’ would not have existed if Louis XV and Louis XIV had not, at some point, been considered *passé*.

More generally one could observe that people die and will presumably continue doing so for the foreseeable future. And yet we can never accept it. That is maybe why, as compensation, the Florestan in us constantly hopes that at least part of his life experience, some of the things he loves, might be immortal. But if a practice really is alive, should we not expect it to die at some point? Even works of art (and by no means I feel “music” should be constrained into this narrow Western category) really make sense at the time they are made. They may still continue to make sense for some more time, but eventually they are bound to lose the function and the import for which they were originally

conceived. Unless music gets re-functionalized, it is ready to go. Oral traditions show very well how new songs are generated through the obliteration of older ones, of which something (maybe just a melodic turn or a vocal mannerism) may be retained within the newer ones.<sup>23</sup> Another way to put it is that oblivion can be very healthy, while memory in excess can be unhealthy: like what Jorge Luis Borges tells us of 'Funes the Memorious' (1942), a man who, after receiving a head injury, is no longer capable of forgetting anything – not even the shape of the clouds as they appeared decades ago.

Be that as it may, however many musicologies we activate, the difficult thing to do always is having them cross-fertilize, so that an overall view of what we really know (and do not know) about musicking finally emerges.<sup>24</sup> So far there has been little of that, although the need to develop wideangle views on music has been felt time and again (Seeger 1970; Rahn 1983). Perhaps this is because specialists are often reluctant to explore other disciplines, reluctant to place scientific findings into the larger landscape provided by the other “ologies” – maybe because “musicologies” are not really felt to entirely deal with the same “thing”.<sup>25</sup> What Bruno Nettl has often said, with his usual humor, deserves to be taken quite very seriously “...I have been struck by the fact that only in some, maybe a few, societies are the various sounds that we in Illinois or Texas call music regarded as forms of the same phenomenon. And so I wonder whether the things we here now call music could even have had one single point of origin.” (Nettl 2016: 8) Are we really justified in giving a wide spectrum of “things” the same name, and think of them manifestations of one single underlying “reality” having one single point of origin?<sup>26</sup> I suspect that communication among music-ologies is probably hindered by their referring to so great an indefinable ‘something’, so rich and complex as to escape full description. Breaking down the big entity into elemental elements may, on the contrary, help us better understand such elements in themselves, and then make them examinable from many angles (historical, anthropological, psychological, etc.)

The very recent field of “sound studies”, with its very name suggests a fundamentally new approach, which might be characterized by the abandoning the word “music” as a suitable term for Scholarly discourse.

## A Concept Ready for Retirement

“A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents  
and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die,  
and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it.”  
(Max Planck 1932)

All statements quoted so far lead us to consider how the word “music” often works like a smoke screen that makes significant differences harder to detect.<sup>27</sup> And differences always matter. For instance, what we find remarkable about people is not what they have in common, but the ways in which they are exceptional. It is not that Pericles and Mme. Curie both belonged to the species of *homo sapiens* that makes us interested in either one of them. Understanding (once the fundamental common traits are established) has a lot to do with recognizing significant specific aspects of reality. Nonetheless, it seems to be a peculiar attitude of the Western mind to bring as many things as possible under the same roof.<sup>28</sup> Valuable as this is in sciences of nature (see, for example the quest for the so-called “theory of everything” in physics), it is less so in the sciences of man and society, where such “roofs” so often rely on controversial definitions.<sup>29</sup>

Once an overarching, indefinable term such as “music” takes over, we are lead to believe it corresponds to a “thing” rather than to a cluster of processes of different forms of behavior involving a plethora of fundamentally diverse forms of sonic interaction.<sup>30</sup> The usefulness of putting them all into same basket calls for questioning. No doubt we would question the usefulness of a category such as that of “dancing surface” (inclusive of the top of my writing-desk, the floor of my house, Route 66 in the

US, the corridors of the Musicology Department in my University), whose only justification would be that, if one really wanted to, all such surfaces could be used for dancing. No doubt we would question the usefulness of bringing under the same name, all activities requiring manual ability (e.g. carpentry and neurosurgery); or of giving a collective name to all tools made of metal (e.g. knives and bulldozers). Categories can be invented – and they often are – that actually mask diversity of function and make no scholarly sense. Robert Proctor and Londa Schiebinger, who coined the word “agnology” (the study of ignorance making, the study of why we don't know things), explain that cultures often avoid or deliberately push aside knowledge which is in their reach; that cultures do not only produce knowledge, but ignorance as well because, for ideological reasons, they may choose to ignore knowledge already acquired or shy away from knowledge acquirable (Proctor and Londa Schiebinger 2008).<sup>31</sup> The word “music”, in fact, is charged with ideological overtones like few others in our vocabulary.

Calling for pushing this word out of scholarly discourse, like I do, may cause misunderstandings. The risk is minimal as long as I address ethnomusicologists. Historical musicologists, on the contrary, may find in my proposal a justification for their more or less explicitly voiced bias that only what we make in the West really deserves to be called “music” and all the rest is something inherently different, if not downright inferior.<sup>32</sup> But they would find it unpalatable that my argument goes as far as suggesting that Bach, Mozart and Chopin would become more meaningful to us, the moment we stop thinking of them “musically”. In fact I argue that we need to bypass a word that even in the realm of Western culture restrains our capacity to comprehend the extreme complexity, and dissimilar nature, of sonic activities developed in the course of our history.

Can it reasonably be maintained that Wipo of Burgundy's *Victimae Paschali Laudes*, Machaut's *Ma fin est mon commencement*, Gesualdo's madrigals, Corelli's Op. 5, Bach's *B minor Mass*, Bruckner's *Abendklänge*, Webern's *Piano Variations op. 27*, and Berio's *Epifanie*, really belong into the same basket? All they have in common is that they are regarded today as highbrow, and are in some way or another written on paper, put on the altar and classified as “classic”.<sup>33</sup> Otherwise, they represent substantially diverse manners of socially using sound, realized through different strategies, different methods of production,<sup>34</sup> under different sets of constraints, conceived to meet expectations that have no common denominator, and utilized in ways the original producers could not have imagined or wished. And as if this cluster were not dishomogeneous enough, very many would add to it even Charlie Parker's *Ornithology*, Jimi Hendrix's *Hey Joe*, Bill Whelans' scores for *Riverdance*, Brian Eno's *Ambient* soundscapes, etc.).

Let us finally concede that term “music” is indeed mature for retirement. It is historically significant, but unsuitable to help us gain further knowledge about how people, non-human animals (... and plants!) interact with sound (Gagliano 2013).

## Conclusion: Looking for Fishing Nets

Theory not only formulates what we know  
but also tells us what we want to know,  
that is the questions to which an answer is needed.  
(Talcott Parsons 1968:5)

The advantages of avoiding the word “music” in scholarly discourse, become apparent once we recall how futile the search for a definition of it has been; for one that everybody might agree upon (Sorce Keller 2010). The search for such a definition reminds one of the “essentialist” attitudes in our culture that Richard Dawkins so often criticised, observing that we like to put things into discrete categories and are ill-equipped to deal mentally with a continuous spectrum of intermediates (Dawkins 2015).<sup>35</sup> My suggestion is that one way of getting out of the essentialist trap is either to multiply

categories, or make them permeable, by trying to understand “sonic actions”, for what they are intended to be; how they function, how they hit the target or miss it.<sup>36</sup> It makes more sense to classify them according to what they intend to do and how effective they are in doing it – rather than putting them into pre-conceived containers such as “genres” are; unless we are willing to accept they belong to more than one genre at the same time, which would make the concept of “genre” almost meaningless.

In the past important distinctions have been made, aimed at making sense of such differences, like the one made by Heinrich Bessler between *Umgangsmusik* and *Darbietungsmusik* (Bessler 1959). Thomas Turino made the somewhat similar one between music made, as he saw it, to be “participatory” and that made to be “presentational”, adding the category of “High Fidelity and Studio Art” (Turino 2008). I think they are both fundamental, but it would probably help, in addition, to recognize how some cultural practices appear sound-centered (totally depending on sound, where sound is the centerpiece of the event); others are sound-enhanced or sound complemented; others are simply not affected by the presence of sound, sound impermeable, in a way; others are, on the contrary, disturbed by sonic intrusions, since sonic actions like all social actions, can well be dysfunctional (Sorcer Keller 2010).<sup>37</sup> That occurs among tribal populations as well as in industrial societies where so many channels exist for conveying sounds every time they are desired, or even when they are unwelcome. Sonic actions can further be iterative, repeated with modifications, reinforced, and given a new lease of life and a new reason for existing in all manners of ways.

The trajectory of sonic actions is also not necessarily the one originally intended and is more often than not “multiple”, as they may easily fragment like a shrapnel shell, breaking down into several types of concurring actions that can, to some extent, be meaningful themselves. Depending on the number of concurring elements they require, they may need a long time, or collective efforts to prepare or, on the contrary, can be extemporaneous. Sonic actions also have “magnitude”, in terms of social and historical impact (what in German would be referred to as *Wirkungskreis* and *Wirkungsgeschichte*). Some are in a broad sense of the term “vectorial”, because they possess, yes, measurable characteristics (duration, amplitude, number and frequency of pitches involved or non periodical vibrations), but also direction and purpose. Some can be more or less effectively aimed at definite targets or, on the contrary, sprayed like an aerosol.

In everyday life, we will all continue to speak about “music”. The idea is so entrenched in our culture that we cannot just think it away. We cannot erase from consciousness everyday expressions like “it is music to my ears”, or literary recollections such as Shakespeare’s “If music be the food of love, play on”. But in scholarly discourse we need better tools; we need new fishing nets; a new vocabulary is needed to better understand processes of sonic interaction. Is my suggestion to think in terms of sonic actions and vectors the best way to go? Surely not. The many clever people active across musicologies will be able, once they set their mind to it, to give better suggestions and, maybe, to come up with a theory capable of doing what Talcott Parson (quoted at the beginning of this final section) says a theory should do; that is, formulate what we know, but also tell us what we want to know.

Here there is a challenge for the brave.

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<sup>1</sup> The development of this series of musings on a theme that has been with me for sometime can be traced in the following articles: Sorce Keller 2010; 2012a; 2012b; 2013.

<sup>2</sup> The meaning of both terms has by no means remained stable in the course of time; but let us stay with what they are taken to express today in common parlance.

<sup>3</sup> Mathematician Godfrey Harold Hardy (1877-1947) once wrote: "A mathematician, like a painter or a poet, is a maker of patterns." (Hardy 1941: 84); and later, "...I have added something to knowledge, and helped others to add more; ...these somethings have value which differ in degree only, and not in kind, from that of the creations of the great mathematicians, or of any other artists, great or small, who have left some kind of memorial behind them." (Hardy 1941: 151).

<sup>4</sup> This whole part of the history of harmony is effectively discussed by Hans Jonas, in his Preface to the edited and annotated edition of Heinrich Schenker's treatise on harmony (Schenker 1973).

<sup>5</sup> Sumarsam (b. 1944) who also is an ethnomusicologist, is in the estimation of many connoisseurs one of the really great Gamelan musicians of our time.

<sup>6</sup> Major cultural differences appear to exist, for instance, in the perception and classification of odours and flavours. And in traditional Chinese thought odours correspond to flavours, and flavours correspond to colours, which in turn correspond to musical tones (Classen, Howes & Synnot 1994:119).

<sup>7</sup> Hermann Hesse explains the same point in a charming manner: "Just imagine a garden with hundreds of trees, thousands of flowers, hundreds of fruit plants, hundreds of herbs. If the gardener were only capable of one botanical distinction, the one between edible and non-edible plants, then he would not know what to do with nine tenths of all he has, and would start uprooting the most fabulous flowers, to cut down the noblest trees, or look at them with hate and dislike" ("Man stellte sich einen Garten vor, mit hunderterlei Bäumen, mit tausenderlei Blumen, hunderterlei Obst, hunderterlei Kräutern. Wenn nun der Gärtner dieses Gartens keine andere botanische Unterscheidung kennt als 'essbar' und 'Unkraut', dann wird er mit neun Zehnteln seines Gartens nichts anzufangen wissen, er wird die zauberhaftesten Blumen ausreissen, die edelsten Bäume abhauen oder

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wird sie doch hassen und scheel ansehen.”)(Hermann Hesse, *Der Steppenwolf*, 1925)

<sup>8</sup> I recently witnessed a discussion about “polyphony” among people who disagreed on whether the example under scrutiny was truly polyphonic. Needless to say that, if one has in mind the theories expressed by Johann Joseph Fux (1660-1741) in his *Gradus ad Parnassum* (1725) he would be disoriented by how the concept polyphony is handled by Marius Schneider in his *Geschichte der Mehrstimmigkeit* (1934): in sum, there is no such thing as a universal concept of “polyphony”.

<sup>9</sup> For that reason whenever sciences of nature take over terms used in everyday life, they usually redefine them. For instance, whereas in common parlance “theory” is synonymous to “hypothesis”; in science “theory” (let us think of Relativity, or Evolution) is the highest degree of approximation to reality possible, until the theory is disproven or subsumed into another of larger scope.

<sup>10</sup> Not to mention terms referring to more specialized genres such as: Bluegrass, Country Music, Disco, Folk, Folk Rock, Gospel, Pop Gospel, Jesus Rock, Heavy Metal, Jazz Funk, Jazz-Rock Fusion, New Wave, Oi!, Progressive Rock, Punk, Reggae, Rhythm & Blues, Rockabilly, Rock 'n' Roll, Soul, Surf music, Folk rock, Acid rock, Space rock, Soft rock, Grunge, Ambient, Acid House, Drum 'n' bass, Eurodance, Hip-hop, Trip-hop, Lounge, Techno, Glam, Industrial Metal, Lo-fi, Dream pop, Psyche Rock, Riot Grrrl.

<sup>11</sup> Students enrolling in a conservatory are not usually offered an entry-level course where the definition of “music” is discussed. They are supposed to already know.

<sup>12</sup> Philip V. Bohlman's books on “Folk Music” (Bohlman 1988) and on “World Music” (Bohlman 2006) are good examples of how much thick history can be evoked by just one such label (Bohlman 2006).

<sup>13</sup> A quick idea of what orientation characterized music studies back in the 1970s (which areas or fields were in the foreground and which were in the background) can be gained from two collections of essays edited by Barry D. Brook, Edward O.D. Downes and Sherman Van Solkema (Brook 1972) and Edward Olleson (Olleson 1978).

<sup>14</sup> Since 1981 they have their own society: the IASPM or International Association for the Study of Popular Music.

<sup>15</sup> Ludomusicology, at least for the moment is not dealing with the “play” element, in general, in music-making, but rather it is focused on music made for videogames. Back in 2011 Michiel Kamp, Tim Summers and Mark Sweeney co-founded the Ludomusicology Research Group, an inter-university research organization dedicated to the study of game music. Their approach to the study of video-game music is well exemplified by their *Ludomusicology - Approaches to Video Game Music* (Kamp, Summers and Sweeney 2016).

<sup>16</sup> One of the first to address the question in some of its aspects was by Henry Stobart (Stobart 2008)

<sup>17</sup> Mark Slobin recently wrote: “Only a few European languages have a term broad enough to cover all the human sounds that we group together this way. Navajo doesn't, nor does Arabic or most other languages. In fact, including the call to prayer alongside the melodies that mothers sing to their babies, or what singing stars present in nightclubs, can get a researcher in trouble. In most languages, each kind of performed sound might have a separate word, or a whole set of linked terms, without the umbrella term 'music,' let alone 'folk music.’” (Slobin 2011: 3) American linguist Morris Swadesh put together in the 1940s and 1950s a list containing about 200 concepts/words one comes across in apparently every language and every culture. “Music” is not one of them (Swadesh 1971: 283).

<sup>18</sup> This has a lot to do with the “lowbrow-highbrow dynamics”. Genres are usually born lowbrow, and later begin to gain respect (Blues, Tango, Fado, etc.). Although highbrow and lowbrow live in the same world, quite often in the same work of art, and just as often in the cultural world of the same person, prejudice in favor of highbrow practices is still strong.

<sup>19</sup> It is more accurate to say that concepts connected to Romantic aesthetics (“highbrow vs. lowbrow”, “work of art”, “masterpiece-immortality”, “genius”, “authenticity”, “originality”) have been de-constructed, recognized to be ideological and, therefore, time-bound. They survive, however, quite strongly, in popular culture and that makes it difficult for scholars to fully abandon the bias they embody. Even in the domain of popular music studies, the exceptional (say the U-2s, or Adele) is more likely to gain attention than amateur rock bands playing in a garage, at the outskirts of our cities.

<sup>20</sup> The attention that Grime music is receiving in the UK and, more recently in the USA, may be a sign that we are moving in that direction.

<sup>21</sup> Here I am just expanding on Leo Treitler's influential essay (not influential enough in my view), “The Present as

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History” where, by taking input from Michel Foucault's concept of “genealogy”, the author comments the fact that historical musicology is so attracted by the past that the present remains not only unstudied but also unnoticed in its most fundamental aspects (Treitler 1989).

<sup>22</sup> Florestan and Eusebius are two imaginary characters invented by Robert Schumann during his engagement with music criticism: Florestan representing the exuberant side of his nature, and Eusebius the reflective side.

<sup>23</sup> The so-called substratum theory in linguistics, today generally accepted, explains the formation and development of languages as a result of interference with previous languages spoken by the populations in question (Ascoli 2008).

<sup>24</sup> Christopher Small uses the word “musicking” in a much broader sense than “music-making”, including into the former activities which, although not directly connected to sound production, nonetheless help make it possible. (Small 1998)

<sup>25</sup> Indeed Adorno maintained that the sociology of the musical object and that of its function express two fundamentally different endeavours, and only the first does justice to its artistic nature (Adorno 1962).

<sup>26</sup> Klaus Wachsmann, wisely would go no further than saying that “all cultures have something that sounds to us like music” (Wachsmann 1971). It is also worth remembering how the concept of music has considerably changed in the West itself, since in ancient Greece the word μουσική was used to comprehend much more than sound-production, but rather poetry and literature as well. Moreover, the idea that music can only be generated by human agency is relatively new in Western thinking. Music history handbooks always mention how throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance three forms of music were believed to exist and the first and noblest of the three was *musica mundana* or “music of the spheres” (back in those days, it was actually believed that planets and stars in their regularly calculated motions generate harmonious sounds). *Musica humana*, to which both a physical and spiritual dimension were attributed, was one step lower in the hierarchy: the external symmetry of the human body, the balance of its parts, the beauty of internal organs, the harmony established by their finely-tuned functioning, the harmonious relation between body and soul. Finally, on a lower level still, came the *musica instrumentalis*, of which only the “practical” or “active” (rather than the more noble “theoretical” or “speculative”) is what we recognize as “music” today. (Seay 1991; Bruce 1994)

<sup>27</sup> Those by Nicholas Cook, Philip V. Bohlman, Bruno Nettl and Mark Slobin.

<sup>28</sup> “Es scheint mithin, als gehöre es zur Logik und Mentalität des Abendlandes, möglichst vieles auf einen Oberbegriff und unter einen Hut zu bringen. □...□ Besondere Not bereitet den westlichen Musikologen, dass □die nicht-europäischen Kulturen; Anm. d. Verf.□ für «Musik» vielfach kein eigenes Wort haben. Von «Tanzen», «Singen», «Spielen» können sie berichten, auch von einem «Singen & Tanzen», von der Hervorbringung klanglicher Ereignisse, die nur verstanden werden, wenn man sie auch erspürt und sieht. Aber einen Dachbegriff, eine übergreifende Abstraktion prägen sie nicht aus, oder nur zögerlich.” (Christian Kaden, *Das Unerhörte und das Unhörbare*, S. 19 f.)

<sup>29</sup> Just, whereas the term “homo sapiens” is to some extent definable, the term “music” is not. No definition of it makes everybody happy.

<sup>30</sup> It is a result of residual romantic attitudes that music, in popular culture, is considered a “thing”, a sonic object materializing the creativity of especially gifted individuals – “art” in a word.

<sup>31</sup> The point could actually be made that cultures are templates indispensable for our thinking, because they drastically (and arbitrarily) simplify the daunting complexity of reality. They provide us, at the same time the precondition for our thinking and, at the same time, the constraints within which our thoughts develop. The quest for knowledge can be therefore seen as the effort of progressively bending those constraints, maybe to the point that their entire cultural background may need, once in a while, to be revised in fundamental way.

<sup>32</sup> That is why ethnomusicologists speak of *music*s in the plural, in order to stress how, all that people do with sound, across the planet, always is incredibly sophisticated. Even when it does not intend to be what Europeans call “art”. In other words, if the Suya of Brazil never make songs comparable to Schubert's, that is no indicator that they are stupid – but rather shows how they are after different things. In that perspective it makes a lot of sense to speak about the “*music*s of the world”.

<sup>33</sup> Although the descriptive or normative intention of the notation greatly varies from case to case.

<sup>34</sup> Here the conservatory trained person would speak of “compositional process”. But is, for instance, Stockhausen's *Stimmung* really “composed”, in the sense that Beethoven's *Appassionata* was? Or, is a Haulapai Indian song “composed” like a song by Rodgers and Hart? One may wonder whether it is at all appropriate to

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use the same label, “song” for both of them.

<sup>35</sup> The idea of what music “is” considerably varies, whether we ask teen agers, conservatory professors (who think in terms of “art”), videogame composers, psychologists investigating phonological abilities among human babies, ethnomusicologists doing fieldwork in the Amazon rainforest, or zoomusicologists studying the humpback whales.

<sup>36</sup> By action I intend, following Talcott Parsons, a process in the actor-situation system which has motivational significance to the individual actor or in the case of collectivity, to its component individuals (Parsons 1968).

<sup>37</sup> Experiments have been made in the UK, to pump out Haydn and Mozart to deter vandals and loiterers in underground stations (The Economist 2005: 36)