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EMBRACING REST LESS NESS

CULTURAL MUSICOLOGY

Birgit Abels (ed.)

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Birgit Abels

Restless, Risky, Dirty (An Introduction)

As music scholars in the twenty-first century, we look back at a long chronicle of discussions about music studies' epistemological scope and interest, and at an equally complex history of debates over disciplinary labels. In the aftermath of musicology's long twentieth century, musicological ideologies abound, and tirades against or in favor of current (ethno)musicological practices have filled bookshelves in recent decades. This book doesn't aim to add to that body of work, nor does it seek to address these issues among its core themes; yet, it does position itself in relation to these debates. Certainly, theoretical and methodological reflection and criticism rank among the very best of intellectual habits; beyond doubt, ethnomusicology's somewhat ambivalent position within the array of humanities, and to a lesser extent cultural studies as well, has been one of its greatest strengths. Yet, especially with ethnomusicology, discussions have grown increasingly polemic (*cf.* Morris 2004) and self-centered, and deservedly, they have hence been reproached for unproductive and idle navel-gazing.[1] Fueled by historical animosities and mutual resentments among musicologists, these debates have taken unjustified precedence, I believe, over the one thing that really matters: aspiring to better understand music(s). This is what cultural musicology cares about the most. It's invested in a musicology firmly centered around music; at the same time, it's invested in offering cultural studies new ways to listen and hence, to better understand, sonic cultural practices including music. That's what this edited volume is about.

The sonic may have moved to center stage in cultural studies, but our thinking, steeped in an eye-centered intellectual tradition and deeply devoted to language-

1 See, for instance, Stobart 2008, or the debate Greve 2002, Brandl 2003 and Klenke et al. 2003.

based 'discursivation' of any and all experience as it is, has remained prosaically unmusical. The loss is musicology's, for music as a mode of knowledge is so much more than a representational practice: by nature, music is irreducible to language. After all, that's precisely why it matters so much. Clearly, the challenges of thinking musically and analytically at the same time are many, and they sometimes contest foundations of the North Atlantic academic tradition. Sound studies, with its radical and intellectually fresh commitment to the extraordinary yet fleeting efficacy of the sonic event, has in recent years already pointed at a number of lingering methodological issues that badly need addressing for anyone truly engaged with sound, and has opened up a much larger terrain than musicology considered to be within the scope of the field. These issues are related to some of those many challenges, and the weirdly difficult relationship of sound studies and musicology speaks of significant anxieties of epistemological nature on the part of the musicologists. These anxieties revolve around an utterly simple but often-avoided question: at the end of a long day, is there anything we can really know about music? (*Cf.* Bohlman 1999) Musicology has for a long time worked to devise tools to name, execute, canonize and thus control the very knowledge about music that it produced in the first place, and that it now believes to possess under the labels of music history, music theory, music cognition etc. In other words, it has attempted to discipline music (*cf.* Bergeron & Bohlman 1996). Yet, there is a common agreement even among musicologists that music's efficacy lies precisely in the fact that its workings are evasive, fluid, and difficult to grasp. It's exactly this evasiveness and fluidity that cultural musicology is interested in. With this, the central challenge immediately becomes tangible: if we can't identify the obscure but clearly powerful aspects of a given musical experience, then how do we academically account for them without falling victim to arbitrariness, and hence to a scholarship that by any standard is dubious?

One possible answer, this edited volume suggests, lies in attending to music's complexity by embracing intellectual restlessness, a restlessness that in the long run enables us to address questions that open up seemingly huge terrains—what does music do to our being-in-the-world? How does the complex nature of our being-in-the-world intertwine with our music-making?—but at the time always inevitably pulls us back to the musically specific and the specifically musical. During the conference symposium in Göttingen in 2012 on which the contributions of this edited volume are based, Lawrence Kramer brought up the Levinas-inspired idea of intellectual

restlessness, and in my understanding it is situated right at the heart of cultural musicology. A restless musicology looks for questions and perspectives rather than answers and presumed facts; refuses to rest content with anything we may find along the way; and remains eager to discover new approaches and ways to think about music. This is because it looks at our relationship to music as that which makes music meaningful (*cf.* Kramer 2016, 169ff.). Intellectual restlessness is interested in process, and specifically, in the process of relating to music. Gone, with this, is the clear distinction between theory and practice; gone is methodological exclusivity. Gone, then, of course, is academic authority. Towering tall, however, is the productive precarity of a musicology invested in the relationship between fleeting and ambivalent music-making practices and an intellectual pursuit that's not invested in predictability and result but in curiosity and question. As it experiments with ideas and concepts, "cultural musicology is high-risk musicology or nothing at all," as Nicholas Cook put it ever so aphoristically.[2] In my appraisal, the benefits outweigh these risks, the presence of which I certainly acknowledge, by far. But in fact, the risks are intellectually necessary, for "the production of knowledge always puts something at risk" (Ray 2001, 47). Paul K. Feyerabend (1975), taking as an example the famous European case of Galilei, has shown that any scientific method has at some point in intellectual history been broken, arguing that intellectual conformity to a set of methods or theories "leads to a deterioration of our intellectual capabilities" (1975, 45). To prevent that, Feyerabend proposed theory and method proliferation: a pluralistic approach turning to alternative theories and methods in order to uncover both flaws in established theories and methods and in the empirical data approached by their means. No established theory or method has been able to 'explain music', and while cultural musicology doesn't seek to 'explain', this fact alone necessitates restlessness in relating to music academically. This is because intellectual restlessness may allow us to draw nearer on the specifically *musical* workings manifest in sonic events as cultural practices—musical workings that form a mode of knowing in its very own right, for they are techniques of making sense of the world. And with this, cultural musicology has the potential to pave the road to better understanding sonic knowledge, a kind of

2 Nicholas Cook, remark as part of the lecture "Anatomy of the Musical Encounter: Debussy and the Gamelan, Again", conference on "Premises, Practices and Prospects of Cultural Musicology", Amsterdam, 24–25 January 2014.

knowledge that has for the most part been ignored even by the various academic disciplines sailing under the flag of musicology. It's a goldmine for the analytical study of human culture.

In their foreword to the much-quoted edited volume *The New (Ethno)musicologies*, Phil Bohlman and Martin Stokes write that a "disquieting relation between the old and the new" existed in musicology; as Henry Stobart elaborates in his introduction to the same edited volume, musicology stood "at an interesting and important historical juncture." There is something to be said for this view. But ultimately, I don't think that this is an apt metaphor. Cultural musicology is much more rhizomatic than it is linear like paths leading you away from an "important historical juncture." Again, *embracing* this rhizomatic nature and turning it into a strength—precisely *because* it very often feels like a lack of linearity and is therefore potentially unsettling in Feyerabend's sense, both academically and personally—will continue to be one of cultural musicology's greatest challenges and at the same time, one of its greatest strengths. Like music itself, the intrinsically critical practice of cultural musicology will continue to challenge what we think we know, deprive us of our taken-for-granted securities, and expose our limitations (in "knowing", in "understanding"). All of this is old news—it's nothing more than the bottom line of postmodern scholarship from the perspective of musical thought. But it's a bottom line which cultural musicology takes serious.

Hence, in proposing a cultural musicology, like others have before me, I do not propose to re-baptize ethnomusicology. I rather attempt to open up vistas of a more inclusive, less theoretically and methodologically constrained framework for the study of the world's many musics and the world's many musical logics (musico-logicas, as I will call them below). There can never be a singular path that represents cultural musicology, and there can never be a singular path that cultural musicology will take in the future. In keeping with this, this edited volume does not at all aim at explaining what cultural musicology is, let alone should be. There are numerous avenues, and numerous more will continue to open up. The perspective of academic music scholarship is, to a significant extent, a North-Atlantic one, and we are indebted to that tradition of thinking, whether we like it or not—a debt that mandates a certain critical responsibility for the current and future care of musicology as an academic field and for that which we as musicologists speak about: music and those who are musicking. Post-colonial studies have time and again called for an appreci-

ation of modes of knowledge alternative to hegemonic North Atlantic ones. The world's many musics all are sounding examples of such modes of knowledge, and cultural musicology is invested in making them resonate with the academic language alongside which we try to better understand music. But in order to make them resonate, we need to "do stuff" (i.e., attend to music) rather than ruminate how we *could* or, even worse, how one *should* "do stuff". Quoting Nicholas Cook again, cultural musicology is a "dirty business"[3] interested in the musically specific rather than the musically general. It's a dirty business wary of theoretical and methodological orthodoxies, for orthodoxies shut our ears on music.

Theory vs. Practice | Exercise

And yet, cultural musicology is indebted to a great deal of theoretical writing. From this writing, it draws a significant number of sensitizing concepts rather than interpretative models. The crucial detail here is that theory isn't the opposite of a "practice" to which it can be applied in some way or another. That's how the terms have traditionally been used in the North Atlantic academy, and that's how cultural theory tends to be, and that's where the trouble starts, "applied" in musicology. The dichotomy of theory and practice in North Atlantic thought stems from the Aristotelian concepts of contemplative life versus active life (in their Latinized and more popular variety: *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*). This set of opposites has always offered to the humanities a clear distinction between that which is related to the material we work with, and the methods we use for exploring our material, on the one hand (in other words, our practice); and the inductive reasoning with which we make our research results useful beyond our "case study," and frame it academically, on the other. Conceived in this way, theory pre-structures our thinking, and inevitably pre-structures our research results in a way that is not particularly helpful in achieving our ambitious goal: to better understand music and ourselves through music. What's more: when conceived in this way, theory lets a good deal of music's innate potential to actually inform our understanding of what's happening lie unused. As musicologists, perhaps we have the unique opportunity to conceive of cultural the-

3 Remark during the "Thinking through Music With … Nicholas Cook" Day 2013, Göttingen, 22 November 2013.

orizing in a more musical way. Instead of applying theory to music, we can think through theory musically and think through music theoretically; and in this way, we can think beyond both. To me, that's at the heart of the concept of musico-logica, on which I will elaborate below.

Calling for a more musical approach to theorizing in cultural musicology like this resonates with one of philosopher Peter Sloterdijk's most momentous ideas. In his book "You Have to Change Your Life," (Sloterdijk 2009)[4] Sloterdijk identifies exercising as a fundamental dimension of the conditio humana; one that has been neglected since the advent of modernity, he argues. There is something in between the clear-cut categories of theory and practice: something that is contemplative without being inactive, and something active that hasn't lost its contemplative capacity. In an Aristotelian vein, Sloterdijk identifies this hybrid of theory and practice to be "exercising." Exercising, he says, is a self-referential practice: its results do not impact on circumstances or objects, like "working" or "producing something" do, but instead exercising helps to form the person exercising, giving them a shape as a "subject-who-can" (Sloterdijk 2010, 16). Exercising, in other words, does not produce knowledge as an object, but rather brings about qualities such as competence, habitus, excellence, fitness and effectiveness. Unlike theory and practice, exercising in the humanities is not about research findings; it's about the process, act, and habit *of finding* and encountering. As such, exercising is also very much about being alive to that with which we occupy ourselves. In a more Foucauldian language, it is a technique of the self. The moment we stop theorizing and start exercising, our doing doesn't care about yielding presumed authoritative research findings anymore; rather, it facilitates both finding new perspectives on musicking and the continuous process of being intellectually alive to music. As musicologists, we have the opportunity to draw closer to understanding musical experience by phronetically learning about the many dimensions of musicking instead of contributing to the production of a heavy, knowledge-constituting theoretical framework. "In addressing myself to music I have to *become* restless. I have to seek restlessness" if I want to be intellectually alive to music, as Lawrence Kramer elaborates in his contribution to this edited volume.

4 Also see Sloterdijk 2010.

Restlessness, Otherness

The notion of restlessness as it's used in the title of this edited volume, then, is inspired by the work of phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas (1981, 1987), who in many ways paved the way for current day's popular ideas about the relationality inherent in, among other phenomena, music. A key notion of his philosophy is the idea of ethical responsibility for the Other. Levinas proposes that responsibility precedes any "objective searching after truth." Obviously, responsibility and its philosophical implications for academic inquiry is where Levinas and the activist agenda of decoloniality meet. For Levinas, it was the traumatic experience of the Shoah that made him radically question taken-for-granted ontologies and epistemologies of North Atlantic thought; for the decoloniality movement, it has been the experience and the legacy of colonial rule that made it impossible to continue along the lines of a system of thought that has enabled, or in any case tolerated, the colonial project. Levinas puts it painfully plain: we need to ask ourselves whether European philosophy with its learned habit of distinguishing between true and false, good and evil, own and other, hasn't had a part in what happened in Nazi Germany. Hence his conviction that we must always make room for alterity, especially intellectually. Theory, for Levinas, is the result of the premature and hence often false conclusion that people, ways of being, or concepts have things in common. In bringing to the fore the ethical dimension of philosophy, Levinas stresses that which separates us and directs attention to relation rather than assumed unity. This relation is always unstable and it gestures at our responsibility to prioritize the Other at all times, and not prioritize third authorities such as law, order and, most dangerously, "morals." Moralism, for Levinas, always harbors the danger of totalitarianism, and European philosophy may well have provided the intellectual preconditions for Western Europe's great catastrophes including the shoah and colonialism. Theory as systematized knowledge, argues Levinas, represses alterity and in aiming for the general, tends to cede responsibility for the individual. But responsibility for the individual is what we have to respect, suggests Levinas, if we want to prevent catastrophes like the ones mentioned from happening.

Levinas is always primarily interested in the encounter with the other, which reveals the other person's proximity and their distance at the same time, for extreme closeness to the other is so immediate that it tempts us to try and take some distance, to

step back from the encounter. In that sense, proximity always also implies a restlessness in approximating the other. Trying to understand music also yields proximity, for we cannot but relate to music as the human beings we are—see Lawrence Kramer and Eva-Maria Alexandra van Straaten's contributions in this edited volume for a further discussion of the implications this has for cultural musicology, and John Richardson's contribution for more on the analytical merit of putting this proximity to analytical work in what he calls "close(r) reading" of music.

For Levinas, the 'I' always has one responsibility more than all others. As a cultural musicologist, my primary epistemology—cultural musicology—has one responsibility more than all others, a responsibility that is

> not a simple coexistence and rest, but non-repose itself, restlessness. Not an intentional movement tending to fulfillment, and which is in this sense always less than the plenitude of its fulfillment. Here it is a hunger, glorious in its insatiable desire, a contact by love and responsibility. Is love a pleasant, tactile sensation, or a way to still seek him who is nonetheless as close as he can be? […] Proximity is not a simple coexistence, but a restlessness. (Levinas 1987, 120–121)

As such, proximity is meant to indicate a relation to the other that cannot be rejected; a relation that by nature involves responsibility for the other. It is impossible to take some distance in order to limit the encounter. But, Levinas suggests, in the encounter with the other we are tempted to do just that, to limit the encounter by taking some distance. Hence, proximity also means a restlessness within oneself that "overwhelms" the distance one might want to take from the immediacy (Levinas 1981, 82). As far as I'm concerned, this very restlessness, part of which is intrinsically intellectual, is cultural musicology's biggest strength. Its ethical implications align cultural musicology firmly with the agenda of decoloniality, for the notion of restlessness strongly resonates with Walter D. Mignolo's concept of border thinking:

> Border thinking is grounded not in Greek thinkers but in the colonial wounds and imperial subordination and, as such, it should become the connector between the diversity of subaltern histories […] and corresponding subjectivities. […] We are not, of course, looking to retrieve an authentic knowledge from Chinese, Arabic or Aymara; but, rather, we want to include the perspective […] of knowl-

> edge subjectivities that have been subjected in and by the colonial matrix of power. (Mignolo 2007, 493)

Restlessness, when it comes to cultural musicology, is a de-linking practice. It forms the core of a musical variety of thinking critically; of a critical variety of thinking musically. And here, Sloterdijk's notion of exercising and Feyerabend's proposal of theory and method proliferation become important again. If we try to conceive of cultural musicology as an epistemology rather than a "discipline", then we need to restlessly *exercise* ourselves in understanding music rather than theorize it. This is a far-reaching step in that it requires us to let go of the notion of (our) academic perusals as potentially authoritative. The assumption inherent in disciplinary thinking that we are able to speak about our subject—here, music—authoritatively significantly contributes to closing our ears for that which makes music meaningful. For authority rests on imagined stability, whereas musical meaning is iridescent. It's not before I let go of the institutionalized obligation to speak authoritatively that I can embrace my own restlessness in relating to music. That's also the moment where I can better listen to, and learn much more from, the many musico-logicas of the world. As a cultural musicologist, I will only ever be *exercising* myself in understanding music, seeking fresh angles from which to listen and relate. This again resonates with Walter Mignolo's ideas about de-linking: "(T)he de-colonial shift […] is a project of de-linking while post-colonial criticism and theory is a project of scholarly transformation within the academy." (Ibid., 452) De-linking can amount to a strategy for decolonizing both the mind and the imaginary:

> The crooked rhetoric that naturalizes 'modernity' as a universal global process and point of arrival hides its darker side, the constant reproduction of 'coloniality'. In order to uncover the *perverse logic* […] underlying the philosophical conundrum of modernity/coloniality and the political and economic structure of imperialism/colonialism, we must consider how to decolonize the 'mind' (Thiongo) and the 'imaginary' (Gruzinski)—that is, knowledge and being. (Ibid., 450)

The task at hand, then, remains similar to the one which post-colonial studies have defined as their central challenge: de-colonising knowledge and bringing alternative epistemologies to the fore. To me, that is one of cultural musicology's most important

potentialities. But decoloniality can never be a state of mind. It will always be a quest. Hence the eternal restlessness inherent in de-linking, which is not looking for new paradigms, but for other perspectives, other (hi)stories, and other epistemologies. The musics of the world as practices of sonic de-linking, are so meaningful to so many of us because they keep moving across and in-between these other stories and epistemologies—see John Richardson's contribution on the close(r) reading of music. If we wish to understand music in more than just one, presumably authoritative, way, then we need to follow suit and markedly let go of our academicism, both musically and theoretically. We need to take more risks, also methodologically.[5] This is in order for us to learn from the many musics of the world about other modes of knowing, modes other than the one(s) we have approached them with up to date; this is in order for us to be reminded of, and enable ourselves to react to, the extent to which taken-for-granted, and often times colonial, power structures are deeply engrained in our thinking and frame our doing (see Charissa Granger's contribution to this edited volume). Like decoloniality, cultural musicology is bound to be a restless trade, for de-linking epistemologies is bound to always remain a process. I conceive of this restlessness as extremely rewarding, as it enables us to draw closer to the subaltern knowledge inherent in any musico-logica.

"Otherness", philosophically speaking, refers to the other of the two. The other of the two, in the context of cultural musicology, is not another, or: an "othered", kind of musicological practice, for instance ethnomusicology. Instead, the other is always an-other epistemology, a musical epistemology, a *musico-logica*. Musico-logicas, in that sense, are cultural musicology's alter egos, and this makes it necessary for cultural musicology to remain amorphous, as Lawrence Kramer once put it; and to

5 This is prominently advocated by a number of cultural analysis scholars. See for instance Bal 2002: "The *field* of cultural analysis is not delimited, because the traditional delimitations must be suspended; by selecting an object, you question a field. Nor are its *methods* sitting in a toolbox waiting to be applied; they, too, are part of the exploration. You don't apply one method; you conduct a meeting between several, a meeting in which the object participates, so that, together, object and methods can become a new, not firmly delineated, field." (Bal 2002, 4)
Also see John Law's exploration of the usefulness of messiness in social science research (Law 2004—the title of the book, *After Method*, already alludes to Paul K. Feyerabend). He suggests that the methods we choose, while ostensibly used to describe so-called realities, primarily help shape that which will then be called reality.

remain in a constant state of flux, and in constant movement in relation to the other epistemologies it is interested in.

Theory vs. practice | Exercising

Musico-logicas are ways of making sense of the world with your ears. They are modes of knowing, and of being alive to, the world. Cultural theory can, at times, help shed a different light on specific musico-logicas, but primarily and importantly, it is a useful exercise to think of musico-logicas as epistemologies. Musico-logicas are about nothing other than musical meaningfulness and the ability to make this meaningfulness tangible. The concept of musico-logica is illustrated nicely by the concept of world hearing, which is a parallel to "world view". Based on Rafael Jose de Menezes Bastos (1999), by world hearing I mean (world)ordering and simultaneously a musical perception of the environment corresponding to a particular world order, and a concurrent situation of the self in this world order. Hereby, musical meaningfulness, i.e., musico-logica, transforms music into a mode in which humans "know" in the broadest sense. In the words of Jacques Attali,

> [M]usic is more than an object of study: it is a way of perceiving the world. A tool for understanding. Today, no theorizing accomplished through language or mathematics can suffice any longer; it is incapable of accounting for what is essential in time—the qualitative and the fluid, threats and violence. In the face of the growing ambiguity of the signs being used and exchanged, the most well-established concepts are crumbling and every theory is wavering. […] It is thus necessary to imagine radically new theoretical forms, in order to speak to new realities. Music, the organization of noise, is one such form. […] An instrument of understanding, it prompts us to decipher a sound form of knowledge. (Attali 1985, 4)

Musico-logica is the system of knowledge and feeling that comes into being when music is a way of perceiving the world. Theoretical language, the language we use as scholars, is only a means to the end of making the particularities of musico-logicas academically productive. In treating musico-logicas as epistemologies and conceiving of itself as one, cultural musicology has the potential to one fine day feed into an academic practice which does more than lip-service to the possibility of decolonial-