



Editorial / Editorial / Editorial

Not Every Classification is Superior to Chaos

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Once again, authors who speak different languages and have different academic backgrounds come together in this new issue of *El oído pensante*. All of them converge at a place where it is difficult to tread: the construction of knowledge about music and its subjects. This confluence is, or wants to be, the rallying point of our publication. Authors arrive at this point not only from different academic backgrounds, as has been said, but also with eyes set on different subjects: the musician as a researcher, the *samba de roda*, the *candomblé*, the queer tango, listening and its environments, musical styles in Mali and the link between tradition and modernity. Nothing new so far. Every periodical publication has a dialogical vocation and demands the confluence of what is diverse. In this sense, *El oído pensante* is one more expression of the diversity of knowledge.

This diversity allows of a reduction. The fact that all of us –authors, editors and evaluators invited to publish– have a certain competence to understand and even opine about a major part of the contributions gathered here, helps to reduce that diversity. However, this reduction cannot break diversity completely. This must be expressed in a straightforward way: despite the possibility of dialogue and our having the same academic routines, our area does not have a name. Therefore, we, the subjects who work in it, do not have a name either. If diversity cannot be named, there is no room for a complete reduction, that is, there is no room to convert its multiplicity into something univocal.

The need to find a name for the area where the works in this issue of *El oído pensante*, and those before it, converge is a problem which goes beyond this publication and seems to have no other purpose than to appease certain uneasiness about it. In a recent anthology, Jonathan Sterne (2012) achieved that goal and called an eclectic area dedicated to the study of sound “sound studies”. The eclecticism of that area is made clear by the fact that its nutrients stem from fields so different from one another as social science, the arts, acoustics, among others. It might be said that the common denominator of the articles collected by Sterne is an interest in –fascination at, in some cases– the acoustic-perceptive dimensions of sound and its presence in the world in terms of power, politics, pleasure, identity, technological changes, etc. Besides, with an exemplary measure of creativity and courage, Sterne has proposed the term “sound students” to designate generically those who work in the area of sound studies. Sterne named an area and also those who work in it, and by doing so, provided a dose of tranquility.

The articles that *El oído pensante* receives are of diversity even greater than those collected by Sterne. That is why any attempt to group them under the same label would mask



their diversity and, above all, their transdisciplinary character. The same would happen if we resorted to a term of exhaustive semantic extension or the old disciplinary denominations with which some of us no longer fully identify with –ethnomusicology, musicology, sociology of music, popular music studies, etc. No doubt, the lack of a name generates certain anxiety but the use of an inadequate one may be even more harmful. In fact, in recent years there has been a tendency to do away with old labels, to the extent that some colleagues enrolled in the more critical tendencies have tried to avoid even the term “music”. In a parallel way, many decide to go away from the formations which they have chosen, by making conceptual and analytical frameworks bigger and, above all, by adopting a disobedient attitude with respect to the disciplinary mandates which establish how to build the objects of study and how to interrogate them. The careers of a hybrid nature, for example those which combine musical practice with research or those which focus on the so-called “regional studies”, also contribute to increasing the ambiguity of this multidisciplinary scenario.

However, the old denominations of those disciplines interested in music and other sound phenomena are still in use: they name and, by doing so, they differentiate and organize institutions, academic titles, congresses, projects, publications, archives, web sites, etc. All these denominations shape a classified scenario. Here is another term which allows us to think of the subject. Classification has been and continues to be a procedure frequently used in the disciplines which are interested in music to establish an order and organize into a hierarchy both the objects studied and the areas which define and address them. In the last years this term has been used to describe the prohibited access to information and both its inevitability, in terms of cognitive resource, as well as the heuristic advantages and disadvantages it has, have been the object of long discussions. Antonio García Gutiérrez in the first pages of one of his books strongly synthesizes the duality of the classificatory procedure and advocates its contrary, declassification:

We get to know by means of a classificatory action [...] Classifying has, among its many meanings, a perverse one of paradoxical appearance: to conceal knowledge. Its opposite, declassification, would consequently mean unveiling it. [...] declassifying, that is, to dismount a dominating ordering structure –generally hierarchical–, involves reclassifying with parameters different from those of that structure. [...] Classifying divides and separates, whereas declassifying adds, gathers (2007: 5-6)¹.

If in one of its meanings, to classify means to conceal and divide, the area in which we work should remain declassified. The “cantometric dream” of Alan Lomax’s (1962) was one of the last classificatory endeavors –at least among the most visible ones. It had positive and negative criticism. Its usefulness to dismantle the qualities of classification, at global scale, applied to an object of study (singing and its joint with social organization) was evident.

¹ “Conocemos mediante una acción clasificatoria [...] Clasificar tiene, entre sus muchas acepciones, una perversa y de apariencia paradójica: ocultar conocimiento. Su contraria, la desclasificación, significaría, consecuentemente, su desvelamiento. [...] desclasificar, esto es, desmontar una estructura de ordenación dominante –generalmente jerárquica–, implica reclasificar con parámetros distintos a los de esa estructura. [...] Clasificar divide y separa en tanto que desclasificar agrega, reúne”.

However, it was not so evident that, without knowing it, its author questioned the attempts to classify disciplines. Lomax's method, called "cantometrics", was a hybrid procedure, quantitative and qualitative at the same time, both particularist and universalist, anchored in a disciplinary routine (transcultural comparison) and a pioneer in the application of a perspective which years later was widely accepted in the area (the theory of performance). So, how shall we label what Lomax did beyond his professional background? Did he do ethnomusicology, folklore, anthropology or what other thing? If labeling what an author does turns out to be complicated –for which there are plenty of recent examples–, it is more so at the level of a field in which several disciplinary traditions converge.

The variety of articles which *El oído pensante* and many other publications receive, and which ultimately we also find in congresses, is a declassified totality –or at least some of us want it to be so. This condition involves the coexistence of overlapping knowledge with blurred borders which the same institutions which have created them are trying to classify, that is: name, divide and organize into a hierarchy. There is room for provocation here. It consists in relativizing the sense of a well known expression pronounced by an author who considered classification –as a cognitive resource– to vindicate those peoples labeled as inferior, although some of us like to consider him a declassified subject, as a major part of his thinking resists being categorized within the limits of a discipline: not every classification is superior to chaos.

References

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