



Editorial / Editorial / Editorial

Some Questions Related to Musicology and its Methods

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This issue of *El oído pensante* includes a thematic dossier for the first time. The new section opens with a set of articles, edited by Alessandro Bratus (Università di Pavia, Italy) and Marco Lutz (Università degli Studi di Firenze, Italy), which reflect on the representation and analysis of sound. As can be seen when reading the papers included in the dossier, the representation and analysis of sound are necessary procedures to confer certain specificity to disciplinary areas that we imprecisely group together under the label “musicology”. These procedures have always been the cause of concern and experimentation, particularly in the area of ethnomusicology, due to its transcultural condition and, probably, they will be even more so in the coming years in popular music studies, in the face of the growing and unsuspected symbiosis which is taking place between sound, image and their reproduction and diffusion technologies. Hatsune Miku and the promises of virtual reality platforms for music¹ are good examples of such symbiosis and of the surprises and challenges which the market will offer to us.

Certain dissatisfaction seems to have coexisted with many of the ways of representing and analyzing sound, especially with those which musicology has used and uses for academic music with European roots. Such dissatisfaction has occurred, at least since the seventies, within a framework of mistrust toward methods, triggered by the criticism of positivism by philosophy of science. In our countries, among those of us who work in the field of social and humanistic disciplines, some events have particularly contributed to cast suspicion on methods in general, on the adoption of analytical procedures of the so-called hard sciences and on the capacity of social and humanistic disciplines to generate their own methods, validation devices and representation forms. Among the events which aroused that suspicion and fostered a state of agitation which oscillated between disenchantment and euphoria, it is worth mentioning:

- The anarchist proclamation by the Austrian philosopher Paul Feyerabend, expressed in his widely publicized and controversial book *Against Method* (1975),
- the mistrust in representation which emerged in American anthropology (Marcus and Fischer 1986, and Clifford and Marcus 1986),
- the disbelief in the capacity of structuralism to unveil unconscious structures beyond language,

¹ See <http://www.vrtify.com/#/>



- the implicit disinterest of cultural studies in “rigor” and their fondness of an ideology-based speech and of the essay-writing genre,
- the celebration of sensibility against scientific apathy (see, for example, Maffesoli 1997),
- the assault by Alan Sokal on the scientific jargon of well known scholars through the publication of a parodic article in the *Social Text* magazine and in his book *Intellectual Impostures* (Sokal and Bricmont 1999), and
- the irruption of an “anything-goes” attitude as a result of the exhaustion of postmodern theories to offer for each idea which was brought down –or deconstructed– a superior and coherent replacement (although arguable, the use of poetic texts as a means of transmission of the field experience can be an example of such exhaustion. See, for example, Kisliuk 2008).

Undoubtedly, this list could be widened with many other cases and even extended to other areas of knowledge. However, within the framework of this editorial, the brevity of the list seems to be loquacious enough. Even though few scholars were unscathed by these attacks, the truth is that their effects turned out to be lesser on those who focused their interest on the sound dimension of music than on those who did so on its social, cultural, symbolic, emotive, corporal, and political dimensions. Among the first, in some cases, dissatisfaction lead the search for a new analysis method, or the depuration of an old one, to be a pertinacious mission. Philip Tagg, for example, has been embarked on a zealous search for specific analytical procedures for popular music for decades.

In the last years, the discussion about the representation and analysis of music, as well as other methodological procedures, has had a new interlocutor: digital technology. A sensation of trust in digital technology seems to be progressively replacing the feeling of suspicion around methods. There is no doubt that the digital world is dazzling. There are convincing reasons for that. Perhaps the day will come when musicology decrees its own “analogical blackout”: everything –or almost everything– will be digital. The result of the dialogue with digital technology is fruitful as long as it does not result into technodeterminism, or into an overvaluation of the quantitative procedures to the detriment of the qualitative ones, as it is the case with some papers enrolled in the so-called “digital humanities” (see Editorial of *El oído pensante* 3, 2). Also, if proximity with digital technology becomes a dependency relationship and, besides, this relationship acquires a monopolistic presence in the work of musicology (let’s suppose for an instant that we all use the same software to do musical transcription), a dilemma arises then, which takes the discussion toward the political plane: Would not digital technology, set of devices designed and controlled by the “centers”, be generating a strongly normalizing effect at global scale on our representation and analysis procedures? It must be admitted that normalization is not the exclusive attribute of digital technology; the staff, the symbols we record on it and the disciplined ear which represents with them the sound waves it perceives, also constitute a normalizing device, the same as most of the other representation procedures (for a description of them consult Enrique Cámara’s contribution in this volume’s dossier). In fact, musicology has been little interested in having a variety of analytical procedures, as its search

has been oriented by the idea –or fantasy– of finding “reliable” and “objective” results, or with greater efficacy with regard to certain purposes. That search, then, should yield as fruit, the finding of “the procedure”, or “the method”, or “the technique” and not the constitution of a heteroclitite reservoir of them.

Now, if we have put the great theories in the key of political criticism as to their origin, their colonizing power, their normalizing effect and their uncritical uses (see interview with Coriún Aharonián en *El oído pensante* 2, 2), we should do the same with the musical representation and analysis procedures. This type of criticism does not seem to have been sufficiently made yet due to a widespread belief, at least in the field of musicology, that in the realm of techniques, only a technical debate is possible and not a political one. Digital technology strengthens this belief as it offers an idle and depoliticized place where to dwell; everything is easier, faster and “better” –technically. In that world, discussions are often circumscribed to how to maximize the technical virtues and/or to how to administer a sort of adequacy of old analogical routines to new digital ones. Unfortunately, we receive few invitations to suspect that at the most technical levels of the methodological procedures, a predefined object of study, which derives from theories that have fallen under some kind of criticism, is concealed. (Does, by any chance, any theory exist which has not been yet a target of criticism?). It is not easy to question methods from this point of view, but it is even less easy to find conclusive arguments to hold that methods are something alien to the theoretical conceptions that generate them and to the powers that struggle to generate knowledge and truth effects.

The reading of the articles which integrate the dossier (and also, though to a lesser extent, those which compose the free subject section) may be a good starting point to debate these and other questions related to musicology and its methods. Sound representation and analysis continue to be methodological procedures which deserve and require experimentation and criticism. That is the understanding of the authors who kindly expose their ideas in this new issue of *El oído pensante*.

References

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