



## A challenging scenario

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*El oído pensante* claims a place in the discourses questioning the epistemological perspectives of music researches. The concepts, the methods, the scientific paradigms, the ideologies, and all the gimmicks that are part of the knowledge generated by those researches are of interest to it. In such sense, it promotes the celebration of doubt and a questioning of the definitive truths, of the infallible theories and of the cozy methods. It is also an invitation to taste diversity: its pages receive contributions from ethnomusicology, anthropology and sociology of music, popular music studies and every realm of knowledge which addresses musical practices from social and humanistic approaches.

*El oído pensante* appears at a critical moment in the development of these disciplines in which we, researchers, are compelled to move in a bipolar scenario which tends to confine options to its extremes: we either work in the old-fashioned way or we are postmodern. Paradoxically, it is a bipolarity which, at least at one of its extremes, contains a considerable diversity of variants: postmodernism can be approached as poststructuralism, postcolonialism, feminism or through a lot of other positions in which philosophical traditions, literary –and “blurred”– genres, interventionist –and even militant– attitudes, etc. are mixed up. But there must be no ingenuousness or idealism; this diversity is not available either in every institution or in every country, since academic practices and powers have caused an unequal distribution of options and an unequal distribution of criticism. Nevertheless, in those territories in which options appear in full, it does not seem to be easy to agree with any of them; it is not convincing to support a perspective of positivist/essentialist origin –even though it shows a certain degree of updating, has some kind of hybridization or cross dresses into an ideologised discourse– or another postmodern-like one which threatens to dilute the “object” and do away with discipline.

Is it possible to escape from this polarity? In principle, it seems viable to do evasion maneuvers and keep an intermediate position. But any mid-way position requires a selection process and the elaboration of the poles: the quiet of the mid-way position needs, previously, to go through the turbulence of the extremes. This type of tensions can be more clearly visualized in the disciplines that draw from anthropology, in ethnomusicology, in particular. This discipline is included in another polarity –they/we– and a fair amount of its development, at least from the 60s in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, has been characterized by a self-reflexive gymnastics aimed at minimizing the “difference”. Sometimes it is felt that in so doing, ethnomusicology has reached a certain level of exhaustion, or has entered a stress condition –in terms of the difficulty to expand itself without going on to be something else. And which are the signs of that exhaustion?



I think that at least three can be identified. In the first place, we find an “aphasic ethnomusicology”, a development of the discipline that manifests itself in a sort of impossibility to name, for instance, the word “music”. In this way, this term suffers a double interdiction: in the past it was rejected because in some circles it was believed that what the so-called “primitive peoples” did with sounds did not qualify to be named by it; at present it is rejected so as not to transfer our values to the otherness. The disappearance of the word “music” from the vocabulary of some ethnomusicologists has required the filling of that vacuum with substitute words. Up till now, that place has been occupied by the term “sound” –or “sound expressions”, “sound manifestations”, “sound practices”, “soundscapes”, “sound cultures”, etc. This term replacement does not seem to be completely satisfactory if we take into account that the word “sound” also carries a certain share of ethnocentrism, since it is associated to semantic fields which set it against noise, confine it to the area of acoustics and, in some cases, define it as a subject which has not yet been the object of aesthetic manipulation –a kind of pre-aesthetic condition. The maximum expression of this sort of aphasic syndrome is the impossibility by ethnomusicology to name itself. The avoidance of the term can easily be verified in the publications of the last decade. The result is the emergence of euphemisms which challenge its intra and inter disciplinary communication capacity, and also its very existence. Can a discipline without a denomination have its own entity?

In the second place, we have a version of ethnomusicology in which music and its subjects seem to be only pretexts for the exhibition of the author –whether it is through their strengths or their weaknesses. In this case it is an ethnomusicology devoted to narcissistic technologies – Facebook par excellence, among others–, to reference closed circles, to self-ethnography, to the use of a hermeneutic approach through which the figure of the person writing is over dimensioned and –against one of the most accepted premises– the otherness tends to be dissipated, to the constant presence of the same names in the discussion lists, etc. Could we be in the presence of something like an “ethnomusicology of the self”?

Last, we have a guilty version of ethnomusicology –similar to that known as “anthropological guilt”, a feeling of discomfort experienced by researchers when seeing their own situation of privilege or power before the condition of their observed. We must include here all the praiseworthy attempts to make the discipline into a tool for social change. The problem with these experiences appears when trying to conjugate militancy with research; the results seem to show that both actions become mutually impoverished. The questions that must be answered in this case are: if what is sought is to do militancy, isn’t militancy without research more effective? And, if what is sought is to do research, won’t it be more effective without militancy? In this version, ethnomusicology seems to acquire a politically correct mark, although for some critics it achieves this status at the risk of being “epistemologically incorrect” –I insist, this does not impair the merits of those who try, on the one hand, to do something against marginality, poverty and the frustrations suffered by millions of people and, on the other, to give the discipline an ethical commitment.

Popular music studies seem to face other questions. They do not have the difference as a central problem, but the method. Whereas in ethnomusicology there are suspicion pockets and

disbelief about the existence of a method which have led to a certain paralysis in its exploration, popular music scholars, after having overcome the contempt coming both from an adonian perspective and from another conservative one –both equally elitist–, have made the search for a method a tireless enterprise. This is no doubt very healthy. Although it is somewhat worrying that, but for few exceptions, the problem of the difference is not on the agenda of those scholars. Very often, the musical expression that the scholars working in this area decide to make into their research focus is also their object of desire. This confluence, which I would rather call “difference annulment”, is in principle no hindrance to carry out research, although it should be taken to the field of criticism. The dichotomy objectivity-subjectivity has been misleading and impertinent since several decades ago, although an affective involvement of the researchers with their object of study requires certain vigilance to avoid falling inadvertently into a falsely realistic discourse or into another one that evokes the comments with a romantic hue that the melomane-musicologists included in the LP back covers of academic music. What I mean by this is that in popular music studies there are not many who stop to reflect how knowledge is constructed and how preferences and the background of the observing subject condition the entirety of the research and writing processes.

The scenario briefly and partially described above appears diverse and challenging and, therefore, invites reflection. *El oído pensante* opens its pages to this kind of challenges and promotes a decentralization of the word, that is to say, it instigates reflection from the appearance of new enunciation spaces. It is promising that the articles and interviews included in this first volume face these problems directly or indirectly. We hope those colleagues who collaborate with the following volumes come back to these concerns or raise other new ones which become pressing for musical research.

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