

Music, Individuals and Contexts

Dialectical Interaction

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Individuals and contexts in musicology and ethnomusicology. An introduction*

Giorgio Adamo

It is with great pleasure that I am welcoming you to our University Department on behalf of the Scientific Committee of this International Conference. The theme of this meeting – music, individuals and contexts: dialectical interactions – was intentionally chosen by three young Doctors of Philosophy who conceived the idea and were willing to organize the event in order to bring together scholars involved in the most various research fields and in particular to create a meeting point for both musicologists and ethnomusicologists.

In fact, the distance between the two scientific perspectives has progressively decreased over the last 50 years. Of course, there are still significant differences in the research methods and techniques, as ethnomusicology is mainly based on field work, direct contact with the music makers and audio-video production, while the most favourite research places for musicologists remain libraries, archives and one's own desk or piano stool. But the conceptual frameworks and the standpoints in the study of music as one of the most complex, elusive, fascinating and intriguing human activities are more and more overlapping.

The interplay between individuals and contexts is in my opinion absolutely emblematic of the progressive evolution of the two scientific traditions from almost opposite standpoints towards a common perspective. There is no doubt that the basis of musicology and particularly music history is the study of musical identities and creative processes of individuals, such as composers, performers, teachers etc.; whereas ethnomusicologists have for a long time been mainly concerned with repertoires shared by human communities or groups of people within specific social contexts and in connection with social functions. 'Authorship' and 'individuality' on one side vs. 'anonymity' and 'commonality' on the other. These seem to have been from the beginning a kind of unconscious ideals or implicit paradigms underlying music research of musicologists and ethnomusicologists.

* Keynote speech given at the opening session of the 1st *Young Musicologists and Ethnomusicologists International Conference* (Rome, 27 April 2017).

This situation has radically changed over the years. In the *Grove Music Online* we find comments like the following:

In the last two decades of the 20th century, there was an explosion in the field of musicology as scholars, sought to give voice to a broader range of concerns. Some have interrogated the fundamental assumptions of historical musicology. Like their colleagues in history, they have questioned the focus on history as the product of great men, great works, great traditions or great innovations. This has led to the study of music as a social force and to histories of musics previously excluded by scholars, many of whom have tended to concentrate on the art music of social élites. Dahlhaus (1977) proposed that musicology should encompass not just stylistic history, “a history whose subject matter is art and not biography or social contingencies”, but also structural history, reception history and cultural history. [...] More and more musicologists are crossing borders and reconsidering the boundaries of their research, not only that which has separated classical and popular music, written and oral traditions, but also historical musicology from other disciplines including ethnomusicology and music theory.¹

Surely, there have been several forces calling for greater attention to be paid to cultural, social and economic contexts. Marxism and its materialistic approach to culture history played a role, overtly or more indirectly. The Austrian Georg Knepler (1906-2003), for example, proclaimed himself a Marxist and was an active communist scholar. His *Geschichte als Weg zum Musikverständnis: zur Theorie, Methode und Geschichte der Musikgeschichtsschreibung*² was (partially) translated into Italian as *La storia che spiega la musica*,³ literally: ‘The history that explains music’. A book full of ingenious interpretations of crucial music history issues expressed in terms of social dynamics and class struggle.

A more general ‘materialistic’ approach is evident in many studies. In their extensive article on *Production, consumption and political function of seventeenth-century Italian opera* – emblematic in its title – Lorenzo Bianconi and Thomas Walker, declaring that their views are close to those of the well-known Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm (1912-2012), describe their research project in this way:

Our intention has been not so much to inquire into relationships between the different artistic components of music theatre (music and text, music and scenography, music and dance, and so forth) as to pose a series of questions concerning the position of music theatre (in all its aspects) in a context of political, social and economic history. Such an enquiry, if it is not to lose

1] Vincent Duckles - Jann Pasler, *Musicology. I. 5. New trends*, in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/46710>> (27.9.2018).

2] Georg Knepler, *Geschichte als Weg zum Musikverständnis: zur Theorie, Methode und Geschichte der Musikgeschichtsschreibung*, Berlin, Reclam, 1977.

3] Georg Knepler, *La storia che spiega la musica*, Milano, Ricordi, 1989.

itself in the idealistic terminology of *Geistesgeschichte*, must concentrate on the relationships between the various traditions and forms of music drama, their clients and their publics.⁴

More in general, how crucial focalization on the specificity of a cultural, social and economic context can be, is clearly expressed in Ellen Rosand's opening words of her *Introduction to Opera in seventeenth-century Venice: the creation of a genre*:

Opera in seventeenth-century Venice rather than "Venetian opera in the seventeenth century": the difference is significant. My concern is with the development of a particular art form in a very particular place. Opera did not originate in Venice, but, as with so many inventions that flourished on the lagoon (printing, for example), what was conceived and born elsewhere found a most nurturing environment in the Most Serene Republic. With the political stability of its oligarchic structure and the economic democracy that sustained it, Venice offered a unique situation for the elaboration of others' inventions. The opening of the Teatro S. Cassiano in 1637 marked the beginning of an important new phase in the history of the young art. What happened to opera in Venice during the seventeenth century was fundamental to the art itself: there and then, opera as we know it assumed its definitive identity – as a mixed theatrical spectacle available to a socially diversified, and paying, audience; a public art.⁵

A direct influence of cultural anthropology and ethnomusicology on historical musicology should not be underestimated. *Music in Renaissance magic. Toward a historiography of others*, by Gary Tomlinson brings into play the concept of 'others', integrating the issue of observer/observed distance and transculturality in the history of western music. As the author says:

Music in Renaissance magic had a second, more general stimulus as well: the great distance of magic from our own historical and cultural perceptions and presumptions. Occult thought – to state the obvious – plays little role in today's European and American intellectual cultures as a whole. It offers a radically foreign and generally discredited alternative to more central strains of rational and analytic thought. [...] In any case (and more personally) my own encounters with Renaissance magic led me to pose the general problem of understanding across wide cultural distances in a specifically musicological context.⁶

It goes without saying that «the general problem of understanding across wide cultural distances in a specifically musicological context» is exactly the core issue of ethnomusicology.

4] Lorenzo Bianconi - Thomas Walker, *Production, consumption and political function of seventeenth-century Italian opera*, «Early Music History», 4, 1984, pp. 209-286: 210-211.

5] Ellen Rosand, *Opera in seventeenth-century Venice: the creation of a genre*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990, p. 3.

6] Gary Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance magic. Toward a historiography of others*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993, pp. 2-3.

Moreover, the author declares:

the borrowing of anthropological hermeneutics might also point up the close affinities between the encounter of the other in its anthropological and its historical guises. Let me put this more strongly: the hermeneutic vantage point compels us to ask whether there can be any essential differences between historical and anthropological encounters of others.⁷

Another example of theoretical convergence between the two disciplines is Peter Jeffery's appeal for an ethnomusicological approach in his *Re-envisioning past musical cultures: ethnomusicology in the study of Gregorian chant*. Regarding 'the relationship of the extant written melodies to the earlier oral tradition,' a core question in his book, he turns to Steven Feld, one of the most influential ethnomusicologists of the last decades:

it is impossible to come up with a list of formal traits that *only* characterize musics of oral tradition... What is important, ultimately, is not the musical traits, but the socio-historical processes through which they have become meaningful (Feld 1986:25).⁸

The last sentence by Feld quoted by Jeffery reflects in fact the core of the ethnomusicological approach as it has been established over the last fifty years. And Jeffery concludes, regarding the problem at the center of his attention: «the nature of the connection between formulaicism and orality in medieval chant must first be determined, perhaps by investigating “the socio-historical processes through which they have become meaningful”».⁹

Up to this point I have tried to show some examples of how the cultural, social and economic contexts have gained attention among historical musicologists. On the other side, it is easy to find examples of how ethnomusicologists have in the meantime turned their attention to individuals and key figures within the musical cultures under study. For a long time individuals were not even mentioned by name: many 78rpm vinyl records and even CDs do not report the name of the performers. Fortunately, this situation has radically changed over the years. Jesse D. Ruskin and Timothy Rice have recently tried to investigate «the position of individuals in musical ethnography» examining «over one hundred book-length musical ethnographies published by ethnomusicologists (and a few fellow travellers)

7] Ivi, p. 6.

8] Peter Jeffery, *Re-envisioning past musical cultures: ethnomusicology in the study of Gregorian chant*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 24.

9] *Ibidem*.

between 1976 and 2002».¹⁰ As they report, «we found that the study of individuals is now a norm in the discipline even as ethnomusicologists retain an interest in broadly shared musical, cultural, and social processes within communities».¹¹

Among the factors that – according to the authors – pulled ethnomusicologists toward the study of individual musicians, two seem particularly significant:

First, when conducting fieldwork, they work with and rely on individual musicians who are sometimes – but not always – among the most exceptional individuals in a given musical community. Second, as communities under the pressures of globalization and political instability fragment and “deterritorialize,” as Arjun Appadurai (1990, 1991) put it, ethnomusicologists have been drawn to the study of individual musicians who are trying to make sense of collapsing worlds, create new individual identities, and knit themselves into emerging or newly encountered social formations.¹²

The encounter with outstanding professional musicians has been clearly one relevant factor. The beautiful film *Amir: an Afghan refugee musician's life in Peshawar, Pakistan* by John Baily¹³ can be considered an illuminating example of how revealing and rich in ethnographical information a report on an individual can be. And the same Timothy Rice mentioned above largely based his book *May it fill your soul. Experiencing Bulgarian music* on his own relationship with the musician Kostadin Varimezov, *gajda* (bagpipe) player, and his wife Todora, singer. As he declares:

I have made two individuals [...] the center of the study. By following the history of their interaction with the world into which they were thrown, I hope to show (1) how they have defined themselves in interaction with that changing world; (2) the dramatic changes in that world over the seventy years or so of their lives; and (3) what aspects of that world – of that culture – are opened to our understanding by musical sounds, performances, and contexts acting as symbols.¹⁴

However, the interest in individuals has gone further, stimulating a critical review of some basic concepts in the framework of the ethnomusicological

10] Jesse D. Ruskin - Timothy Rice, *The individual in musical ethnography*, «Ethnomusicology», 56, 2012, n. 2, pp. 299-327: 308.

11] Ivi, pp. 316-317.

12] Ivi, p. 299.

13] John Baily, *Amir: an Afghan refugee musician's life in Peshawar, Pakistan*, black & white film, 52 min., National Film and Television School in association with the Royal Anthropological Institute, UK, 1985.

14] Timothy Rice, *May it fill your soul. Experiencing Bulgarian music*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 8.

theory and methods. Gerhard Kubik, for example, criticized in several articles the tendency to use abstract designations – such as ‘culture’ – as substitutes of complex phenomena involving individuals. No individual can actually ‘represent’ a culture, and no individual ‘belongs’ to a culture as a kind of cradle-to-grave cultural membership.¹⁵ Kubik introduced the concept of «individual cultural profiles, contrasting it with collective descriptions of people in terms of “cultural identity”, as if we were all streamlined and life-long captives of a “culture”». ¹⁶ Individual cultural profiles can be more or less overlapping. What we face are not “cultures” but individuals sharing – to a greater or lesser extent – ‘culture traits’.

We have therefore arrived at the point where the study of individuals is not only welcomed in connection with the study of musical cultures but it has become the core of the investigation process. The differences between individuals within a given cultural context can actually be more interesting than the shared part of their cultural profiles, since these differences may provide more information about the way music is functioning within the life of humans. If I may cite myself, in a recent study I described how two sisters of the same family, born and living in a very small village in a rural area in Malawi, had invented two different and peculiar performance techniques on the *nkangala* musical bow.¹⁷ Human individual creativity in making and enjoying music is from an anthropological point of view at least as interesting as the sharing of cultural traits.

As we have seen, there is thus enough evidence to show that while historical musicologists were discovering the importance of contexts, ethnomusicologists were moving toward the study of individuals. In my opinion, in order to bring together young musicologists and ethnomusicologists one could not choose a better topic than *Individuals and contexts: dialectical interactions*. And the proof is the incredible response to our call for papers: we were planning to organize a meeting with 20-30 participants, so we were pleasantly surprised – and a little frightened – when we received 101 proposals! After a very difficult selection process and a few cancellations we can now welcome more

15] See for example Gerhard Kubik, *Interconnectedness in ethnomusicological research*, «Ethnomusicology», 44, 2000, n. 1, pp. 1-14.

16] Gerhard Kubik, *Culture contact: cognitive and psychodynamic aspects. Transcultural understanding in art history, religion, music and animation*, «Etnografie Sonore/Sound Ethnographies», 1, 2018, n. 1, pp. 21-36 [cited during the seminar as unpublished manuscript].

17] Giorgio Adamo, *Elena and Sisiliya Kachepa, musicians. Playing nkangala in a Malawian village*, in *Transgressions of a musical kind*, Festschrift for Regine Allgayer-Kaufmann on the occasion of her 65th birthday, ed. by Anja Brunner, Cornelia Gruber and August Schmidhofer, Aachen, Shaker Verlag, 2015, pp. 51-74 (with video examples available online).

than 60 people. The only negative aspect is that we have been forced to schedule parallel sessions, but reciprocal 'visits' are of course encouraged, and in any case we are sure that during these two days we'll have a lot of good opportunities to dialectically and amiably interact!