

Towards a definition of 'Music'

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What is 'music'?

'Music': a culturally specific concept

Although no society of which we have any knowledge has ever been without what we call music, the *concept* of music is by no means universal. Many cultures have no word equivalent to what we seem to mean by it. For example, the Tiv nation of West Africa and the Ewe of Togo and Eastern Ghana do not seem to have had much need to single out music as something needing a special word of its own any more than we Brits seem to be in need of three different words for the basic types of snow, each of which the Inuktitut language refines conceptually into several sub-categories.¹ To be fair, it should be said that the Ewe do actually use the English word 'music', but only as an untranslated loan word to denote foreign phenomena like singing hymns or the sounds issuing from a cassette player or the radio. The music (in our sense of the word) they make themselves in traditional village life has no equivalent in the Ewe language.

'Vù really means 'drum' and *há* is the word for club or association. A *vù há* is the club you belong to in the village. You could belong to a club with fast or slow drums, depending on your character and family. Voice is called *bá*, so singing is *vù bá*. *Vù* is used to signify the whole performance or occasion: the music, singing, drums, drama and so on.²

Having no exact verbal equivalent to our 'music' clearly does not mean that the culture in question is without music in any more than the English language's lack of verbal equivalent to the Hindi notion of *rasa* or the German notion of *Weltanschauung* means that we cannot conceive of different types of feeling/mood/state-of-mind (*rasa*) or of different ways of looking at the world (*Weltanschauung*). Nor is a lack of equivalent to our word 'music' connected to village communities in west Africa because the Japanese, with their long-standing traditions of music and theatre in official religion and at feudal courts, did not feel obliged to invent a word equivalent to the European concept of 'music' until the nineteenth century. The Japa-

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1. Inuktitut is an Inuit language. For more on the issue of Inuit words for various types of snow, see <http://www.linguistlist.org/issues/5/5-1401.html> (2002-02-23), <http://www.industryweek.com/Columns/ASP/columns.asp?ColumnId=258> (2002-02-23).
 2. Conversation with Klevor Abo, Göteborg, 1983-11-02.

nese translated 'music' as *ongaku* (音楽), *on* (音) meaning sound and *gaku* (楽) enjoyment, i.e. sounds performed for listening enjoyment or entertainment.³ It just seems that neither the Japanese nor the Ewe needed a word for what we mean by music until they met us Europeans at the height of our colonial expansion. It must have been strange to come across people who seemed to treat what we call music as if it could exist independently of a larger whole (drama, singing, dancing, ritual, etc.), and the Japanese went straight to the heart of the matter with the word *ongaku*, identifying the European notion of music as referring to the non-verbal sounding bits of what they themselves considered as part of a far larger set of phenomena and practices. The Ewe reacted similarly to our strange culture, using the English colonial word 'music' to label European music which was not an integral part of their own traditional culture and which we Europeans seemed to regard as separable from other cultural practices.⁴

From these two brief cross-cultural observations about the word, it should be clear that 'music' denotes a particular type of human sound production and that those sounds are associated with the human voice or with human movement. It is also clear that these sounds have functions involving particular aspects of communication in particular social and cultural situations. Adding our own experience of our own musical culture to the argument, we are now in a position to put forward a working definition of 'music' so that we can start discussing music's origins.

'Music': a working definition

It is necessary to start this section by positing a few axioms.

Eight axioms

1. Music does not exist unless it is heard by someone, whether out loud or inside someone's head. Sounds which no-one hears, even a recording of music out of human earshot, is only potentially, not really, music.
2. Although the original source of musical sound does not have to be human, music is always the result of some kind of human mediation, intention or organisation through production practices such as composition, arrangement, performance or presentation. In other words, to become music, one or more humans has/have to organise sounds (that may or may not be considered musical in themselves), into sequentially, and sometimes synchronically, ordered patterns. For example, the sound of a smoke alarm is unlikely to be regarded in itself as music, but sampled and repeated over a drum track, or combined with sounds of screams and conflagration edited in at certain points, it can become music.⁵

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3. Lecture by Prof. Toru Mitsui (Kanazawa University) at IPM, Liverpool, February 1993, cf. *nogaku* (music and movement in *No* theatre), *hogaku* (stylised indigenous music, song and dance), *gagaku* (courtly music and dance). The Welsh word for 'music', *cerddoraeth*, contains three morphemes: (i) *cerdd*, meaning song or poem; (ii) *-or*, being similar to the 'or' at the end of 'inventor' or 'councillor'; (iii) *-aeth*, roughly equivalent to the *-ship*, ending of 'musicianship'. *Cerddoraeth*, translated as 'music', therefore literally means the art of those who make songs or music. *Cerddor*, it should be noted, is Welsh for 'musician'.
 4. There is, of course, more to the history of meanings for the word 'music' in Europe. Some of those developments are mentioned later (see , p.).
 5. Even John Cage's famous *4'33* can be qualified as music because its performed 'silence' is organised as a sound event in relation to other, contrasting sound events.

3. If points 1 and 2 are valid, then music is a matter of interhuman communication.
4. Like speech, music is mediated as sound but, unlike speech, music's sounds do not need to include words, even though one of the most common forms of musical expression around the world entails the singing, chanting or reciting of words. Another way of understanding the distinction is to remember that while the prosodic, or 'musical' aspects of speech — tonal, durational and metric elements such as inflexion, intonation, accentuation, intonation, rhythm, periodicity — are important to the communication of the spoken word, a wordless utterance consisting only of prosodic elements ceases by definition to be speech (it has no words) and is more likely to be understood as 'music'.⁶
5. Although closely related to human gesture and movement — for example, dancing, marching, caressing, jumping — human gesture and movement can exist without music even if music cannot be produced without some sort of human gesture or movement.
6. If points 4 and 5 are valid, music 'is' no more gesture or movement than it 'is' speech, even though it is intimately associated with all three.
7. If music involves the human organisation and perception of non-verbal sound, and if it is closely associated with gesture and movement, it is close to preverbal modes of sensory perception and, consequently, to the mediation of somatic (corporeal) and affective (emotional) aspects of human cognition.
8. Although music is a universal human phenomenon, and even though there may be a few general bio-acoustic universals of musical expression (see p.5), the same sounds or combinations of sounds are not necessarily intended, heard, understood or used in the same way in different musical cultures.

Short definition

On the basis of the eight points just presented, we can now posit a working definition of music for the rest of this text.

Music is that form of interhuman communication in which humanly organised, non-verbal sound is perceived as vehiculating primarily affective (emotional) and/or gestural (corporeal) patterns of cognition.

Music: other important basic traits

Before starting our discussion of music's origins, it is important to state three more tenets so that there is no doubt about the notion of music, at least as the word is used in this text.

6. Tonal languages are those languages in which denotation is conveyed by means of pitch (as tonemes) as well as by consonants and vowels (phonemes). In Cantonese, for example, the same string of phonemes produces both I LOVE YOU and THE GOOSE LOVES YOU. I and GOOSE are distinguished tonematically, not phonematically. The same goes for the difference between ANDEN ('the spirit') and ANDEN ('the duck'), or between BUREN ('carried') and BUREN ('the cage') in Swedish. English makes no such differences. Even COMBINE ('join together') and COMBINE (harvesting machine) are phonematically and accentually distinct: kəm'baɪn and 'kɒmbaɪn.

1. *Concerted simultaneity and collective identity*

Musical communication can take place between:

- an individual and himself/herself;
- two individuals;
- an individual and a group;
- a group and an individual;
- individuals within the same group;
- members of one group and those of another.

Particularly musical (and choreographic) states of communication are those involving a *concerted simultaneity* of sound events or movements, that is, between a group and its members, between a group and an individual or between two groups. While you can sing, play, dance, talk, paint, sculpt and write to or for yourself and for others, it is very rare for several people to simultaneously talk, write, paint or sculpt in time with each other. In fact, as soon as *speech is subordinated to temporal organisation of its prosodic elements* (rhythm, accentuation, relative pitch, etc.), it becomes intrinsically musical, as is evident from the choral character of rhythmically chanted slogans in street demonstrations or, even more obviously, from the choir of Ancient Greek drama. Thanks to this factor of concerted simultaneity, music and dance are particularly suited to expressing *collective messages of affective and corporeal identity* of individuals in relation to themselves, each other, and their social, as well as physical, surroundings.⁷

2. *Intra- and extrageneric*

Direct imitations of, or reference to, sound outside the framework of musical discourse are relatively uncommon elements in most European and North American music.⁸ In fact, musical structures often seem to be objectively related to either: [a] nothing outside themselves; or [b] their occurrence in similar guise in other music; or [c] their own context within the piece of music in which they (already) occur. At the same time, it would be silly to treat music as a self-contained system of sound combinations because changes in musical style are found in conjunction with (accompanying, preceding, following) change in the society and culture of which the music is part.

The contradiction between MUSIC ONLY REFERS TO MUSIC (the intrageneric notion) and MUSIC IS RELATED TO SOCIETY (extrageneric) is non-antagonistic. A recurrent symptom observed when studying how musics vary inside society and from one society to another in time or place is the way in which new means of musical expression are incorporated into the main body of any given musical tradition from outside the framework of its own discourse. These 'intonation crises' (Assafyev 1976: 100-101) work in a number of different ways. They can:

7. Even multitracking, overdubs, etc., although frequently performed by the same individual on different occasions, constitute an intrinsic collectivity of parts or voices.

8. See section about 'sonic anaphones' in *Introductory Notes to the Semiotics of Music*, www.tagg.org/teaching/analys/semiotug.pdf.

- 'refer' to other musical codes, by acting as social connotors of what sort of people use those 'other' sounds in which situations;⁹
- reflect changes in sound technology, acoustic conditions, or the soundscape and changes in collective self-perception accompanying these developments, for example, from clavichord to grand piano, from bagpipe to accordion, from rural to urban blues, from rock music to technopop.
- reflect changes in class structure or other notable demographic change, such as reggae influences on British rock, or the shift in dominance of US popular music (1930s - 1960s) from Broadway shows to the more rock, blues and country based styles from the US South and West.
- act as a combination of any of the three processes just mentioned.

3. Musical 'universals'

Cross-cultural 'universals' of musical code are bioacoustic. While such relationships between musical sound and the human body are at the basis of all music, the majority of musical communication is nevertheless culturally specific. The basic 'bioacoustic universals' of musical code can be summarised as the following relationships:

- between [a] musical tempo (pulse) and [b] heartbeat (pulse) or the speed of breathing, walking, running and other bodily movement. This means that no-one can musically sleep in a hurry, stand still while running, etc.¹⁰
- between [a] musical loudness and timbre (attack, envelope, decay, transients) and [b] certain types of physical activity. This means no-one can make gentle or 'caressing' kinds of musical statement by striking hard objects sharply, that it is counterproductive to yell jerky lullabies at break-neck speed and that no-one uses legato phrasing or soft, rounded timbres for hunting or war situations.¹¹
- between [a] speed and loudness of tone beats and [b] the acoustic setting. This means that quick, quiet tone beats are indiscernible if there is a lot of reverberation and that slow, long, loud ones are difficult to produce and sustain acoustically if there is little or no reverberation. This is why a dance or pub rock band is well advised to take its acoustic space around with it in the form of echo effects to overcome all the carpets and clothes that would otherwise damp the sounds the band produces.
- between [a] musical phrase lengths and [b] the capacity of the human lung. This means that few people can sing or blow and breathe in at the same

9. See section about 'genre synecdoches' in *Introductory Notes to the Semiotics of Music*, www.tagg.org/teaching/analys/semiotug.pdf.

10. For relation between smaller bodily movements (fingers, eyes, etc.) and musical surface rate, see Tagg 1997. *Bra Böckers Läklexikon, vol 5* (Höganäs 1982: 145-146) states that a well-trained athlete's pulse rate can, if measured during sleep, be as low as 40 b.p.m. And that the pulse of a baby in a state of stress exceeds 200 b.p.m. This coincides with the limits of a metronome, from 40 (*lento*) to 212 (*prestissimo*).

11. Musical volume must be considered as a culturally relative phenomenon, in that variations between societies in the loudness of the soundscape (Schafer 1977: 71 ff, 151 ff, 181 ff) will require 'loud' and 'soft' to adapt to what is audible above the noise of the soundscape (Tagg 1987: 145 ff). For more about links between vocal timbre and types of human activity, see Lomax (1968).

time. It also implies that musical phrases tend to last between two and ten seconds.¹²

The general areas of connotation just mentioned (acoustic situation, movement, speed, energy and non-musical sound) are all in a bioacoustic relationship to the musical parameters cited (pulse, volume, phrase duration and timbre). These relationships may well be cross-cultural, but that does not mean that emotional attitudes towards such phenomena as large spaces (cold and lonely versus free and open), hunting (exhilarating versus cruel), hurrying (pleasant versus unpleasant) will also be the same even inside one and the same culture, let alone between cultures. One reason for such discrepancy is that the musical parameters mentioned in the list of 'universals' (pulse, volume, general phrase duration and certain aspects of timbre and pitch) *do not include* the way in which rhythmic, metric, timbral, tonal, melodic, instrumental or harmonic parameters are organised in relation to each other inside the musical discourse. Such *musical organisation* presupposes some sort of *social organisation* and cultural context before it can be created, understood or otherwise invested with meaning. In other words: only extremely general bioacoustic types of connotation can be considered as cross-cultural universals of music. Therefore, even if musical and linguistic cultural boundaries do not necessarily coincide, it is fallacious to regard music as a universal language.

12. This practice is known as circular breathing. Of course, some musicians (e.g. jazz saxophonist Roland Kirk and every didgeridoo player) can inhale through the nose and blow out through a wind instrument. At the same time, there are all sorts of bellowed (e.g. bagpipes, organs), mechanical, electromechanical and electronic instruments that can make melodies without being hampered by the restrictions of the human lung. Some people even sing while breathing in. More importantly, neither percussion instruments (including mbiras, pianos, xylophones as well as drums) nor plucked / bowed instruments depend on inhalation / exhalation to measure phrases. Nevertheless, studies of rhythmic or melodic recurrence (reiterative, sequential, varied, etc.) in any music will almost certainly show that most rhythmic / melodic statements can be perceived as units (motifs or phrases) seldom occupying less than two or more than ten seconds. Even the didgeridoo player, who inhales while chanting into a hollow eucalyptus trunk, measures his constant flow of sound with rhythmic and timbric motifs that also fit in with phrase durations.