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Music, Anthropology, and the Senses: Cognition for Social Change

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Abstract

***Abstract** – Both anthropology and music embrace the method of participant observation: performance and observation of self and others. As a classical musician, I bring a musical heritage in both classical and experimental music performance, and as a cultural anthropologist my training in ethnology allows me to couple musical sensibilities with participant observation. This paper explores three venues of human expression: experimental musical improvisation, musical performance with and for street and working youth in Brazil, and anthropological fieldwork. I argue that the combination of musical expression and participant observation provide unique opportunities to share the universality of lived experiences, while augmenting complex cognition that can lead individual actors and researchers to initiate social change.*

Index Terms – Anthropology, Communication, Identity, Social Change, Experimental Acoustic Music

Music, Anthropology, and the Senses: Cognition for Social Change

Introduction

“Music has a way of finding the big, invisible moving pieces inside our hearts and souls and helping us figure out the position of things inside us” (Karl Paulnack's - Director of the Music Division, Boston Conservatory. Address to the Incoming Freshman Class - 2004).

Between 1997 and 2001, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork on street and working children in Curvelo, Minas Gerais, Brazil, in five Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). As an anthropologist my background in classical and experimental music positioned me as a music instructor, a position that I filled within the NGOs where I worked (Mikulak 1994; 1985; 1981). Two music groups were organized: one experimental, and the other a traditional choral group. In this article, I suggest that music and anthropology can provide an important contribution to social action and applied anthropological research. This paper presents a brief overview of current research on music, communication and agency, and discusses my research with street and working youth. I explore the incorporation of experimental musical improvisation and composition work as both a musician and an anthropologist, and present data on the development of social and environmental awareness among the youth participating in this workshop.

University of California sociologist, Tia DeNora, asks a profound and fundamental question about the power of symbol in music and empirical evidence of music's communicative ability. De Nora asks, “How it is possible that music is experienced as inherently meaningful when there may be no one-to-one correspondence of meanings to musical elements” (DeNora 1986). Sociolinguistics, cognitive sociology, and ethnomusicology draw from social constructionist theory to demonstrate the rich human practices of social interaction, cognition, identity, performance, and symbolic meaning practiced by humans in all societies in everyday life (Bourdieu Pierre 1984; Bourdieu, Pierre 1987; Goffman 1959). For example, ethnomusicologists Steven Feld and Aaron Fox discuss the plethora of research on the relationship of music to language, politics, environment, and nature. Their 1994 *Annual Review of Anthropology* article Music and Language moves music beyond the linguist tradition of analyzing musical structures as akin to grammatical categories (Feld & Fox 1994). Such authors have redefined the study of music and culture, into the study of music *as* culture. In this paper, culture is defined as the embedded, imbued, reflected, and individually expressed and micro-mutated totality of local and trans-local human experience. Our definition asserts that lived lives are quintessential to music *as* culture, which supremely reflects symbolic meanings richly encoded in body, gesture, gaze, call and response, emotion, group empathy, political movements, social class as social consciousness, as well as the full quotidian of living. In this sense, music is trans-cultural and mutable.

In addition, I argue that life is performance, on the inner stage of individual cognitive worlds, and on the larger stage of everyday cultural interchanges. Local and trans-local experiences are writ large and small on individual and group imaginations, and music *as* culture is the perfect conductor for transmitting and communicating human symbolic domains. I concur with Feld and Fox, who argue for the anthropological study of “voice” in music (and physical gesture, musical shape, tone, texture, and expression) as they argue that “...ethnological perspectives are increasingly social, linking the structure and practice of musical performance and styles with music's deep embeddedness in local and translocal forms of social imagination, activity, and experience (Feld & Fox 1994: 25). Indeed, the speaking and singing voice (if viewed as a form of hermeneutics), is analyzable as a knowledge system that attempts to understand social phenomena and self agency within local frames of reference. Music as “voice” then is embedded with metaphorical and symbolic inflections that express attitudes, beliefs, social class, education, hierarchy, passion, and more. Music as culture demonstrates the enormity of social information expressed daily in all cultural venues from science to art and from classical to funk. Consider that vocal statements are thick descriptions and as such can be analyzed as an interpretive theory of

culture (Geertz 1973). Consider further that vocal statements are encoded with culturally specific oscillations of pitch, tambour, rhythm, and silences, all of which are subtly and amazingly comprehended, communicated, and interpreted by humans involved in the everyday performance of life, in the translation of “thick interpretation.” Sapir’s work in linguistics drew upon such functional analysis with attention to the entire range of communication forms in given social settings (Sapir 1925). Stephen Feld’s groundbreaking work on bird calls, human language, and sound as symbolic systems explores the rich variety and embedded meaning in sensory systems (Feld 1982). Feld’s revelation is that sound – its production and expression – are reflections of social systems of meaning drawn from environmental specificities.

Within this context, I argue that classical music listeners can be contextualized as homophilous, since their backgrounds and socioeconomic status tend to share common characteristics such as taste, language, education, and access to resources (Mark 1998); individual agency provides for the element of change, both individually and collectively. An interesting body of research could explore ways to bridge such musical disparities by bringing classical, experimental, and popular musical experiences to *favela* youth and their communities, thus linking universities, symphonies, local musicians, and disparate social classes into a common sympathetic experience.

Finally, music as culture provides an inspiring canvas for anthropological artistic and empirical exploration into human interaction and meaning. The following section discusses the nature of music, language, cognition, and meaning within the context of performance practices and social activism.

Spontaneous Collaborative Performance of Personal Biography and “The Position of Things”

Several social scientists have explored the nature of music, language, cognition, and meaning in the context of music as performance practice and music as social activism. British anthropologist Ruth Finnegan studied amateur musicians in one of Britain’s “new towns.” Her work reveals and highlights the rich and usually ignored world of the practice of music performance, from classical music to pop, paying attention to how individuals “learn” music, create rehearsal practices, and performance codes. She found that, contrary to assumptions about urban industrialized settings, music as communication and practice is alive, thriving, and progressive (Finnegan 1989). Her work brilliantly brings the practice and insights of ethnographic fieldwork into the forefront, demonstrating how social theory, politics, and practice work best. Helmi Jaerviluoma, head of the Finnish Society for Acoustic Ecology, launched a three-year project to map his country’s urban and rural 100 most acoustically-pleasing sound environments in order to study the social, cultural, and ecological impact of sound environments on human activities (Jaerviluoma 2004). Jack Loeffler, musician, audio technician, environmental activist, and sound-scape artist, “...advocates grass roots activism in reshaping the destiny of habitat from within, and the profound importance of decentralization of political power, a condition born of anthropocentrism run amok” (Loeffler 2001). His *Voices of Youth 2000*, works with folk music, oral history, local folk musicians, and youth to present a cultural montage of depth and insight about rural communities in northeastern Nevada (Loeffler 2004). Historian John Baskerville from the University of Iowa has written about the connection between African Slave Singing (field hollers), “free Jazz,” and the Black Power Movement in the United States during the 1960s. Musicians often led the way by rejecting imposed identities related to the term “jazz music.” Musicians such as percussionist Max Roach redefined jazz as a black music, born not of American roots, but of African ones (Baskerville 1994). Ethnomusicologist Carole Pegg studies Mongolian music and performance, linking both the history of the nation-state, local beliefs and aesthetics, mechanisms of social control, gender practices, and epic folk lore. The everyday life of Mongolian tribal peoples comes alive through her groundbreaking work (Pegg 2001).

How do individual working youth distinguish themselves as social actors in social settings through the use of music, sound, and verse? When I began my experimental music group (which met everyday during the week in the afternoons), my task was a difficult one. As a white, middle-class American woman with professional degrees in classical music, my sensibilities were substantially different from those of the youth with whom I worked. I found that listening was my most valuable tool, to both the words spoken and to the quality, energy, and tone of voices and body gestures. Secondly, my

experience with Black Jazz musicians in San Francisco, and my immersion in American Contemporary Music with avant-garde musicians and theater were the connecting link between me and the children in the projects where I worked. I have a Bachelor of Music degree from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and a Master of Arts degree from Mills College, both in music performance as a classical pianist. I specialized in American Contemporary Music and recorded with Composers Recording, Incorporated in New York, and 1750 Arch Street, in Berkeley California. One of my first projects was to ask participants to tell stories amongst themselves about any subject or area that interested them. From these stories, short theater pieces were created by participants, and they were accompanied by musical instruments designed and constructed by two or three participants.

Over the course of a year, the youth in this music group conceptualized and completed twenty uniquely designed experimental musical instruments. Among the instruments were wooden and metal xylophones, wooden drums (both slit drums and raw hide drums), bamboo slit drums, a variety of shakers (made from tin cans, bottle caps, bamboo, and cardboard), water gongs (using cut and hollowed gourds placed in bowls of water and struck with mallets), stringed African cellos, thunder claps from sheet metal, cut bamboo tubes hit with the soles of rubber sandals, a variety of scrapers and rasps, tin can drums, and tube drums from PVC pipe of graded diameter sizes. The following section discusses how street children express and communicate (individually and collaboratively) their collective “knowing” and local identity



Figure 1 Stretching/Drying Cow Hide for Drums



Figure 2 Cutting Bamboo for Wind and Percussion Instruments

Music and Improvisation Exercises

In tandem with my students, a variety of exercises were developed using rhythm, voice, and their experimental instruments. The exercises that we developed encouraged and empowered them to use their voices and their instruments to develop improvisational proficiency with rhythm, timber, sound dynamics, and emotional expression. We began working with sound as a *sense*, AND as a communally shared experience, instead of an instructional and structural experience. I drew upon the work of musician Pauline Oliveros, who states that music is the “... sensual nature of sound, its power of synchronization, coordination, release and change. Hearing represents the primary sense organ - hearing happens involuntarily. Listening is a voluntary process that through training and experience produces culture. All cultures develop through ways of listening” (Oliveros 2007). I drew from her composition *Sonic Meditations*, incorporating environmental and natural sounds into a series of sonic meditations that required students to respond spontaneously with sonic responses.

I wanted to encourage each participant to give descriptions of sounds that contained rich emotional and perceptual information. It was common to discuss the qualities of sounds: were they dark, bright, cold, warm, hot, happy, angry, or neutral? Texturally, sounds were also described as rough, harsh, hard, cold, cool, smooth, sharp, warm, and comforting. I encouraged participants to draw pictures of their emotional and textural impressions. Showing emotional pain and vulnerability is not accepted among street youth, yet theatrical performances and musical compositions provided a venue to present a diversity of their real life experiences which breached the gap between what was emotionally acceptable and what was not permitted. Theater and music safely packaged and presented the “unspeakableness” of hardships, poverty, and racism (Mikulak 2007a, 2007b, 2002)

The production of sound/music that is the production of a non-verbal cohesive exchange using non-traditional instruments for the production of sound, emotion, and meaning in a patterned form, can be a difficult task. Participants found it difficult to maintain steady rhythmic beats, while interacting with their peers. Translating emotional and symbolic meaning into musical expression is also difficult, since it is a subjective and uniquely cultural experience, dependent on place, gender, class, and age. I argue that spoken language frames meaning and provides normal ranges for vocal expressions and displays based on cultural norms, behaviors, and expressions. Drawing from and also expanding upon cultural norms about sound, gestures, and meanings proved difficult. Experimental music techniques proved invaluable, and enabled participants to both mimic and push the boundaries of culturally acceptable sound production and expression, eventually liberating them to enter into what was for them, un-charted territory.

The youth at the project were willing participants, but nonetheless, presented the usual forms of resistance to creative improvisational dialogic techniques, such as embarrassment, shyness, bravado,

incomprehension, confusion, and disruption. Many of the exercises, initially created and demonstrated by me, were seen as unusual and at times absurd. However, absurdity, especially in the improvisational arts, is a technique known to produce an environment that enhances a kind of self-imposed vulnerability. To be successful, participants must enter into unusual and therefore, unknown situations with a degree of good humor, trepidation, and trust.

For example, one exercise that I used in the early stages of our work came from theater technique and made use of the well-known theater improvisation, the “imaginary machine.” Several people, each responsible for creating a movement and sound as part of the machine’s function were assigned parts to perform. The group chose a machine that would make dry dog food pellets. The creation and production of the machine required team work and precision of gestures and sounds. One person was the mechanical bucket that creaked and turned and dumped the dry grain into a large imagined vat. Their movements were accompanied by a series of unrehearsed roles and improvised sounds which needed to be repeated over and over, with rhythmic proficiency, without stopping. If done well, the result unites into one grand performance of body gestures and vocal sounds, producing the effect of the dry dog food factory. Additional exercises included hand-clapping rhythm circles, round-robin rhythm exchanges, sound walks, listening with the body, and sound meditation sessions, to name a few.

Over a period of time, the music group investigated not only the sound of their handmade instruments and voices, but also explored the ambiance of their physical environment, both on the streets and in the pulsing sounds of nature around, where in the early evening hordes of insects, usually taken for granted as background noise, took to song around sunset. We recorded city sounds while walking through the streets, store sounds when standing in various stores (super markets, street markets, clothing stores), car sounds, horses hoofs on cobble stones, babies crying, people talking in passing, blaring speakers from stereo shops, and loud speakers on top of cars and busses spewing forth propaganda. Collected environmental sounds, both from nature and from cityscapes, were used as background for musical improvisations and vocalizations. In addition, our collected sounds inadvertently led to a heightened awareness of environmental concerns (littering, pollution of rivers, and underground wells), an increased sense of self-awareness within the context of self, others, and place, and a dawning desire to become politically active within their communities (for example write letters to the City Mayor for paved roads, sewage cleanup, and increased police protection in their *favelas*). Dirt roads produce a choking dust that became consciously audible on our audio tapes, as did horse hoofs, cell phones, bicycle bells, and cash registers.

Musical Compositions

Eventually, the group began to compose songs. Caio (a nine year old boy) wrote the following song:

“Once upon a time
a forest was full of little beasts,
These little beasts
always lived in harmony and care,
One day there appeared a very wicked man.
He destroyed nature
He imprisoned the animals
The animals tried to find a solution
They wanted to show to the man
That to be destructive was not good.
With a lot of united force
They made the man think
The man that lived to destroy
Became a man that preserved and built.”

Rodrigo (a ten year old boy) wrote the following song about the music group:

Here in the project
There is a lot of playing,
There is a lot of friendship,
There is a lot of longing
Let's go guys!
Do a little hand clapping!
What a pretty thing is this young girl!
What a cool thing is this recycling shop!
There is a lot of wood, bottles, and cans
With four small round ones -- and a can
You will soon have made cool musical instrument!

The music group wrote their first joint composition and called it *Preciso de Amor* (I need love):

Preciso de Amor (I Need Love)

Ever since I was little
I was abused at home
Beaten by my father and mother
I suffered condemnation
 I need love
I never went to school
Nor can I write my name
I'm the fruit of society
That wants to see me dead
 I need love
The Police beat me
To carry and use drugs
At night no one gives me love
Because of this I'm in this situation
 I need love
I wish that my life
Were different
With rights and liberties
So that I could grow with contentment
 I need love
I wish that the world
Were full of love
That everyone was happy
Without thoughts of pain
 I need love!

The composition of this rap song was a turning point in sensitivity and communication between individuals within the group. It was selected by the youth in the experimental music group to be turned into a theater piece about the reality of the hardships experienced by street and working children in Brazil. Most of the children in the music group lived in *favelas* and were aware of the hardships of poverty and the responsibilities placed upon them. Many youth worked the streets daily selling ice cream and peanuts, shinning shoes, working as domestic servants, gardeners, and farm labors. Some youths regularly

attended school and others periodically, depending on their family's financial needs. As the music group continued to practice and gain proficiency with improvisation, we were invited to perform at community events, and to present our work at other NGO projects in Curvelo. Our performances included improvisational instrumental pieces, traditional children's *roda* (circle) songs, original compositions, and improvisational rhythm hand clapping, and vocal rhythmic improvisations.

Collaborative musical improvisation enhanced sensitivity in both positive and painful ways, and enabled the participants to communicate about topics that at times were seen to be culturally and politically inappropriate for project youth. Over the period of a year, the music group came to be appreciated by local NGOs and the community, and discussions of economic, racial, and educational inequity began to enter into daily dialogues between the youth, and among their family members and friends. Social activism was beginning to occur from within the community, driven by the initiatives identified by the youth in the experimental musical improvisation group.

Street and working youth who participated in the experimental music program found that through experimentation, improvisation, and composition, they intuitively crossed the border between their real life experiences and the inequalities that divide them from the rest of Brazilian society. Music empowered them to find new ways to communicate and creatively express their experiences through positive social exchanges.

Collaborative Music Project

Everyday experience defines place through the social relations of daily experience and lived performance. The drama of daily life is produced by individuals whose lives are always contested realities tied to ideological processes that are often invisible or unexamined by the performer. In Curvelo, for NGO *favela* youth in the experimental music group, "place as voice" is produced through the locus of their social class, ethnicity, age, and social marginality (Mikulak 2007a, 2007b, 2002).

Musicians and anthropologists are uniquely positioned to listen, hear, understand, and respond to social meanings within a research paradigm, since both musical and anthropological fieldwork and performances seek to understand encoded meanings in emotional cognates and metaphors (Stecker 2001). Music also produces pleasure, trust, and vulnerability between and among those engaged in its production, and as such offers a sympathetic bridge between the researcher and the subject, and enhances the development of reflexivity in all participants. Clearly, not all music, or all science, is either meaningful or pleasurable. However, I argue that the artistic processes of music production and anthropological participant observation are themselves valuable as they promote listening, collaboration, and empathy; and regardless of the end product, collaboratively reflect and promote understanding of the human experience.

My background in music conservatories, anthropology, and avant-garde music centers encouraged me as researcher and performer to acknowledge and embrace a constant shift from the classical to the modern and beyond. Experience as a student in music conservatories and avant-garde music centers challenged me to expand and re-create a world-view inclusive of contested norms, not only in music, but in the political economy of my everyday life where the realities of poverty, racism, and gender demanded my attentions and my reactions. Such contestations inform and encourage me to argue and question everyday notions of sound, music, tone, expression, meaning, and finally, social reality itself. As an anthropologist, I extend my understanding of everyday living to include constructionist theories about the nature of known reality. I concur with Wacquant who argues that social reality is a "contingent ongoing accomplishment of competent social actors who continually construct their social world via the organized artful practice of everyday life" (Wacquant 1990)..

Street and working children in the world's cities inhabit and traverse spaces traditionally constructed for adults and navigate their way through poverty, injustice, the marketplace, play, and family. As the enterprise of anthropology and music extend from the university setting into the daily practice of everyday life through research, I argue that ethnographers working with young people (musical and anthropological) must represent the views of the children and youth who are the locus of

research agendas. In doing so, we may disrupt our deeply ingrained and culturally defined constructions of who we deem children and youth to be, but given the opportunity, children's lives as revealed by children themselves, can lead the study of childhood and adolescence into uncharted and very interesting territory. Indeed, I encourage musicians and anthropologists to collaboratively work together for a new perspective on childhood, empowering youth to be active social agents for the purpose of expanding and enhancing their life's capabilities and possibilities.

Future collaborative research work between the musicians and anthropologists could include the development of a program designed to bring classical music performance and private instrumental instruction (with access to such instruments), to interested and promising *favela* youth. Classical, experimental, popular, and avant-garde music can be linked to the study of science, grammar, history, and any other learning experience, through combining music with abstract concepts found in various disciplines. Student experimental music groups could be linked to local musicians from all musical genres and the construction of experimental musical instruments could draw from the collective skills of local craftspeople, welders, physics professors, and engineers. Indeed, the envisioned project would link any number of community venues and professionals, including television, radio, and video art production at both the *favela* and university level. Through such experimental music groups and classical music instruction and infusion program, anthropologist's research would broaden our understanding of the transmutability of sound as symbol, while empowering local *favela* youth and their communities to work for positive social change.

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