

Word of thanks, Friedrich-Christoph-Dahlmann-Prize

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It is an honor and a privilege to stand here and receive the Friedrich-Christoph-Dahlmann-Prize of the Faculty of Social Sciences of Georg-August-Universität Göttingen. I sincerely thank the dean of the faculty, the members of the jury and all others who have thought me worthy to receive this prize for their trust.

I have been asked to very shortly introduce my dissertation. As you will have noticed, I will do this in English. I understand spoken and written German very well. But speaking it myself is a different thing. I do not have the talent of Dutch people such as Linda de Mol or Rudi Carrell. So I hope I am excused to use English on this occasion.

My dissertation is titled “Musicking in Groningen. Towards a Grounded Theory of the Uses and Functions of Music in a Modern Western Society”.

The first word of the title, ‘musicking’, is a rather unusual word. I use it to indicate any form of human behavior in which music, in any capacity, is involved.

Singing or playing the piano are good examples.

But also listening to a live performance of a singer and a pianist.

Or listening to a CD of them.

Or buying that CD.

Or stealing it from a shop.

Or even collecting all CD sleeves of that specific singer and pianist but throwing the CDs themselves away.

They are all examples of ‘musicking’.

The American anthropologist Clifford Geertz once said that the main question any anthropologist tries to answer is:

‘What the hell is going on here?’.

I tried to keep my main question just as simple.

“How do people in the province of Groningen (the Dutch province where I live) in 2012 use music in everyday life, and what do they use it for?”

Or, slightly more abstract:

“What are the uses and functions of music in Groningen in 2012?”

I consider my study answering that question to be an ethnography of western – or at least Dutch – or at least Groningen - musical life.

To answer the question, I used Andreas Reckwitz formulation of a theory of practice in “Das hybride Subjekt” as a starting point. I adopted Grounded Theory in Kathy Charmaz’ version as a useful research approach.

And I chose to work with empirical data from thirty theoretically sampled narrative biographical interviews.

The choice for the interview as the main method is rather unusual in ethnography.

It was based on methodological considerations about how to write an ethnography of your own culture.

How to perform ‘anthropology-at-home’ or, in my case, ‘ethnomusicology-at-home’ –

because if I am anything (which I am not sure of), I am an ethnomusicologist.

My dissertation eventually pictures a ‘sufficiently suggested’ grounded theory of musicking in Groningen, 2012.

That theory is developed in three main steps.

The first step is a very prosaic, empirical and precise account of the many forms of ‘musicking’ in everyday life as found in the empirical musical social situations my interviewees experienced from day to day.

The second step is the development of a model of the functions of music

– of what music meant for my interviewees.

This model is very general as well as very generous.

General because it explains what music does for all my thirty interviewees and,

due to the linkage to existing literature, probably to many more.

Generous because it did equal justice to all of them.

The model I developed is an inclusive model,

regardless whether my interviewees loved music or hated it,

were active in hardcore punk, a shanty choir or the symphony orchestra,

were listening to Dolly Parton or to Maria Callas.

The third step in my dissertation is, one might say, a 'critique of culture'.

It shows that not only each individual leads an idiosyncratic musical life filled with meaning for her or him.

But also that those idiosyncratic musical lives are constantly measured against the background of what 'our' culture thinks music essentially is.

Our 'hegemonic discourse about music', as Reckwitz would say.

That discourse hinges on the idea that music is a specialism.
More precisely, that music essentially is a combination of art,
craftsmanship and expression.

It is against that very normative idea about the essence of
music in western culture

that individuals measure their own musical lives.

And against which they often feel the need to excuse
themselves for their own musical existence.

“I am not a musical person”, many of my interviewees declared,
in the interview showing the opposite.

Or: “I don’t even read staff notation.”

And: “I play the guitar but I never took real lessons.”

It is precisely the combination of a detailed picture of what
people may do with music and what that may mean for them,
and the cultural context and discourses in which all that is
embedded,

that for me makes out the value of my dissertation.

I work in a conservatoire – a Musikhochschule – in the
Netherlands.

The result of my dissertation is that I now have found words and
models to describe not only what music means for people within
the conservatoire

– professional musicians, future professional musicians, art
music lovers –

but also what music means for people outside that context.

It is precisely the connection between the world of art music – of which the conservatoire is one of the central institutions – and the outside world that has become problematic in the Netherlands in the past two decades.
And that will probably continue to grow even more problematic.

I therefore use the results of my dissertation to find, within my institute, ways to reconnect the conservatoire with the society surrounding it.
That is a sometimes painful, at times hilarious, but always a worthwhile process.

I thank my Doktorvater prof. dr. dr. Peter Alheit for his wise counseling over the past years,
And I thank Georg-August-Universität Göttingen from the bottom of my heart for the opportunity it has given me to write this dissertation.

I earned a bachelor degree in Maastricht, and a master in Amsterdam;
but I think I have found my true 'alma mater' here, in Göttingen.

Thank you.