

The Musical Other

Introduction

Dear Members of the Executive Board,

Dear Colleagues from the conservatoire,

from other schools of Hanze University,

and from many of our partners from the 'real world',

Dear international guests,

Dear Students – for whom we are here, eventually, in the first place,

Ladies and Gentleman,

It is an honor to stand here and read my inauguration speech as professor of 'New Audiences' of the research group Lifelong Learning in Music. As you will have noticed, this lecture will be in English. The lecture is based on an essay I wrote for this occasion. The essay will be handed out as a booklet to all of you at the end of this festive meeting. The booklet is in English and in Dutch. So if you feel you need a little nap, take the opportunity. You can do the catching up afterwards.

The theme of my lecture will be: 'Meeting the Musical Other'. Who your Musical Other is, is for you to decide. And I suggest you take the opportunity at the reception afterwards to look for your musical other of this afternoon and have a friendly chat. The booklet, ladies and gentleman, will help you with that. The booklet has the title printed, but as you see the "O" of "Other" is missing. But by asking help of a Musical Other you may solve this.

To demonstrate this I would like to ask Mariska Boekhorst to come here. Mariska is a student from our Arts Academy Minerva, and has designed the booklet, with help of my great Minerva-colleague Michiel Uilen of the Minerva Project Office. If you need a book designed, hire Mariska; she is great.

Mariska and me will now show the trick with the booklet. Mariska is my Musical Other for the afternoon. I have a chat with her about her musical life – like me, she likes Ilse de Lange, it turns out - and then I ask her for a fingerprint on my booklet to complete the title. We use the ink pads which will be widely distributed during the reception. It goes like this...

After this short explanation, I start the more formal part of my lecture.

Starting a lecture

"I would really like to have slipped imperceptibly into this lecture, as into all the others I shall be delivering, perhaps over the years ahead. I would have preferred to be enveloped in

words, borne way beyond all possible beginnings. (...) There would have been no beginnings: instead, speech would proceed from me, while I stood in its path - a slender gap - the point of its possible disappearance.”

I wish these were my words, but of course they are not. They were pronounced by philosopher Michel Foucault upon accepting the chair “History of the Systems of Thought” at the Collège de France in 1971. I love the hesitation with which he starts to speak, the feeling that rather than speaking his words, he is spoken by them. The feeling that language is there before you were there; that you express a pre-existing world, and while expressing it you call it into being. It reminds me, for reasons I would like to explain but have no time for, of the cello concerto of Ligeti, and of the music of the Australian Aborigines.

But equally I would have liked this lecture to begin thus:

“Time passes. Listen. Time passes.

Come closer now.

Only you can hear the houses sleeping in the streets in the slow deep salt and silent black, bandaged night. Only you can see, in the blinded bedrooms, the coms and petticoats over the chairs, the jugs and basins, the glasses of teeth, Thou Salt Not on the wall, and the yellowing dickybird-watching pictures of the dead. Only you can hear and see, behind the eyes of the sleepers, the movement and countries and mazes and colours and dismays and rainbows and tunes and wishes and flight and fall and despairs and big seas of their dreams. From where you are, you can hear their dreams.”

This feeling of the omniscient storyteller which Dylan Thomas expresses in *Under Milk Wood* – the feeling that you are able to see everything, to hear everything, yes even to crawl into the heads of other people and witness their dreams – is the dream of any social scientist, I suppose. At least it is my dream. In my dissertation, which I finished last year, I tried to answer the simple question what people – you, me, the neighbor, the fishmonger – do with music and what music does for people. At some point I wrote:

“The uses of music are incredibly varied. In 34 interviews 30 interviewees told me innumerable things they did with music. They pictured small (and sometimes bigger) scenes in which music figured, scenes you could document on video and broadcast on TV as documentary pictures of ordinary lives – a girl on holiday cries in her bed in the evening because her father plays the violin downstairs; a boy comes home from school for the afternoon lunch and his mother listens to the radio while preparing lunch; a woman sings a psalm for her children during a thunderstorm; another woman gives away her handmade bamboo flutes she loves so much to an artist friend out of fear of doing the wrong things with them... not always huge dramas, but the material of which individual musical lives are made up.”

The material of which individual musical lives are made up. That, and the question how professional musicians might connect to those individual lives, is the topic of this lecture.

Music is important to everyone

And it starts off with the basic notion that music is important to nearly everyone. Not in the same way perhaps, but all of us - you, me, the neighbor, the fishmonger - all live our own idiosyncratic musical life. It is, actually, hard to find a human being who is *not* leading a musical life.

We may wonder why that is, which would bring us into the domain of music psychology or evolutionary studies. I will not go there. On the contrary, I would rather – maybe surprisingly – like to state here, just as a way of thinking, that music is evolutionary meaningless, and that we should refrain from explaining music's existence in evolutionary terms. Because (paraphrasing Dutch writer Karel van het Reve's work on the Ptauroides Volans – the "Reuzenkoeskoes" in Dutch) the traits of living beings should not be explained in terms of their evolutionary usefulness, but rather in terms of their evolutionary harmlessness.

So let us assume music was at some point and for some reason invented because our acoustical environment made it possible and human beings are inventive. Once invented, it just stayed, because it led to no significant disadvantages (a slight rise in repetitive strain injuries and the much later invention of stage fright put aside) and basically became meaningful for various people in various ways.

It is precisely that – that music is in itself neutral and harmless but may be put to a thousand household uses – that makes music intrinsically interesting. It is, as I said earlier, not hard to show that for nearly everybody music is an important factor in life. The way music is put to use is endlessly varied; as Eric Clarke puts it:

"Music affords dancing, singing (and singing along), playing (and playing along), working, persuading, drinking and eating, doing aerobics, taking drugs, playing air guitar, travelling, protesting, seducing, waiting on the telephone, sleeping... the list is endless."

It is this important power of the neutral phenomenon of music to serve as a vehicle for an endlessly varied list of meaningful human behavior, of 'musicking', as Christopher Small would have called it, that is in itself enough demonstration of the importance of music.

All that musical behavior, all that "musicking", serves basically three functions: it affirms, connects and regulates the self. Music enables people to affirm themselves as an individual, a musical individual. As a person with an individual musical identity, closely tied to what they consider as their 'inner core'. Music allows individuals to connect in numerous ways to numerous aspects outside the self – to the world out there. That ranges from connecting to others, to the past, to place, to God, to the inner self, or to the realm of the beautiful. All those connections lead to effects, and people use those effects to influence themselves, and use them to influence others. They regulate themselves and others, sometimes consciously, sometimes not very consciously.

It is amazing to realize the power music – that neutral and in itself harmless invention - plays in the life of individuals, in so many different ways, through those three functions of affirmation, connection and regulation. I say "in so many different ways" on purpose, because I do not feel there is any need to look for one reason for music's strength. I also think there is no empirical evidence for that. Music is not mainly a 'tool of the self', as important thinkers in the sociology of music would state. Nor is music first and foremost an aesthetic phenomenon, as important thinkers in music

philosophy, music psychology or music education - people inhabiting the conservatoire included - may tell you.

Music is not one thing. Music is always many things at the same time. It is different things for different people in different places and in different times. It is always a lot of things at the same time, in an ever changing constellation. Its character changes over time. It is everything, always, and for everyone. Independent of age, of educational background, of socio-economic status, of cultural background, of gender. And independent of style and genre, I must add. It is demonstrably *not* the case that classical music is an artistic phenomenon, that rock is intrinsically connected to the functioning in young peer groups, or that singing in a shanty choir is first and foremost a socially – rather than musically - oriented phenomenon. Borrowing a phrase from Dolly Parton (one of my musical heroes), music is a coat of many colors. Or, as the theory of practice (the social theory I endorse) would proclaim: music, as an everyday phenomenon, is ‘messy’ and inherently hybrid. Always. And for everyone.

Music in culture

With that in mind, the professional musician should look at his future with confidence, one should think. Music is important for nearly everyone, and the variety of uses and functions music has in the lives of individuals gives musicians endless opportunities to connect to them, to be meaningful in their lives.

How then is it possible that the professional music world feels so threatened nowadays – and indeed is sometimes threatened? How is it possible that the Residentie Orkest was put away as a hobby club of trombone players by a Dutch politician who is normally not fighting Music but Moroccan immigrants? And how, I must add, is it possible that opposing this, the only thing the official music world thought of was hiring Bernard Haitink to proclaim that “we all know how civilized a country is that is closing orchestras” – an equally unproductive remark as the one on the trombonists’ hobby club?

How is it possible that musicians, and conservatoires, have trouble convincing government officials, funding authorities as well as the general audience that their possible contribution to their lives, to the life of everyone and anyone, is worthwhile? How is it possible that, rather than being acknowledged as one of the most powerful humanizing media around, able to affirm, connect and regulate human life in such a powerful way, music is put aside as a rather unimportant epiphenomenon, as belonging to the fringe of human life?

The answer is simple. It is because of what I just said about the three main functions of music is empirically correct but culturally far from generally acknowledged. There is a huge difference between what we actually do with music in our messy everyday lives, and what we ‘officially’ say we are doing or should be doing. There is a huge difference between practice and discourse, between our ‘ways-of-doing’ and our ‘ways-of-talking’, between how we act and what we proclaim. And because our proclamations are, of course, also acts (we all know the power of words, we all know that saying something is doing something), an inextricable knot comes into being of what we actually believe the essence of music is. We underrate some forms of musical behavior and some genres, and

overstate the importance of others. And when I say 'we', I mean that highly intangible thing called 'society', or 'culture'. We don't feel we do it; it is being done, nobody really does it; it is discourse in the Foucauldian sense at work.

The essence of what 'our culture' sees as musical is the following: music is a specialist skill; music is an artistic 'work'; and music is an expressive performance. That is the way we look at music. That is the standard we measure music, musical behavior, individuals against. That is what we base our official musical policies on. That is what we see as the basis of our music education. And that is what the conservatoire, the top of our music educational pyramid stands for, and what it teaches the future professional musician.

I am of course the last to deny that this cultural dominant definition of the essence of music as an artistic-expressive skill has led to beautiful results. It has given rise to the existence of Beethoven's violin concerto and of Bach's St Matthew's Passion as performed today on the stage. It has given rise to Ravi Shankar's acceptance on the stages in the western world, to the acceptance of Lou Reed as an Artist with a capital A, and to the incorporation of New York jazz in the conservatoire curriculum. Because let us not forget that: the idea that music is essentially an artistic-expressive skill is culturally so dominant that it does not confine itself to classical music. It is so dominant that it expresses itself in the Concertgebouw Orchestra as well as in The Voice of Holland.

And it is here that tensions arise. On the one hand, this definition of "what it means to be musical in this world", of music as essentially an artistic-expressive skill, is inscribed in the genes of our culture – it is discourse in the true sense, hidden, inescapable, owned by no-one but omnipresent, a manner of speaking which only exists in the speaking and at the same time determines the speaking. But it is a discourse that only partially describes our messy and hybrid world. And, I believe, it actually less and less describes the actual musical world many people live in.

People, I would pose, live their musical lives independently of this official discourse of music as an artistic-expressive skill more and more. People do with music what I described before – they affirm themselves, they connect to the outside world in many ways, they regulate themselves. And they do that in a variety of ways which is irreconcilable with the cultural dominant model of musicality as expressed in the discourse of music as an artistic-expressive skill.

I believe that is one of the main reasons of the tensions in the professional music world nowadays. On the one hand, music is alive and kicking in the daily lives of ordinary people as it may never have been before, given the wealth we live in and the medialization music has undergone. On the other hand, people seem to connect less and less to the model our 'official' culture outlines of what music essentially is. For many people, music in their daily life is not a highly skilled expressive performance of an art work per se – it is background to make doing homework easier, it is something to dance to, it is a CD to be collected, it is a way to make your parents angry, or a way to reconnect to God, the inner Self, or the happy days of childhood.

The conservatoire in society

This, then, makes the place of the conservatoire, as an educational institute, so interesting. The conservatoire is not just a school. It is not simply an institute where musical 'training' at the highest

international level is offered, as we – the conservatoires – are so proud to proclaim. The conservatoire is not a neutral place, as has been shown time and again in important research. It is also a place where ‘official’ culture is replicated, where the discourse of music as artistic-expressive skill finds itself at its peak, where power relations in our world of music are again and again defined and transmitted.

The conservatoire is a beautiful place, I can say, having worked in conservatoire settings for over twenty years now; but it also is potentially an inward-looking place. And for young musicians who want to become professional musicians in the boundless, hybrid and messy musical world out there, it is potentially a dangerous place. Dangerous because its reproductive tendencies may give a few of the graduates a full-flung start into an ‘officially approved’ professional career but may leave many less lucky students with an unfavorable disadvantage already right at the start of their career.

That is one of the reasons for the existence of our research group Lifelong Learning in Music. Our research group hopes to contribute to the possibilities of students to step into the world as a musician looking for opportunities, looking for connections, looking for a meaningful contribution to the lives of all those people out there for whom music is such an important force in life. It hopes to foster in our students an attitude which combines, on the one hand, excellent professional musicianship with, on the other hand, a desire to meet The Other out there. Not on ‘our’ terms of artistic-expressive skills, in the taken for granted ways and the taken for granted places we know so well: the stage and the music classroom. And also not exclusively on ‘their’ terms; but somewhere in the middle. Somewhere where the musician is able to look for a potential audience not by telling them what he is as a ‘product’ captured in a glossy folder, a glitzy website and an impeccable musical product. But by showing them what he has on offer as a musical individual, and how that might be of use to his counterpart, that musical Other.

This is what I consider to be the core of the professorship of New Audiences which I fulfill as of January 1, 2014. The core is: understanding why other people do with music what they do, why music is such a powerful force in the lives of nearly all our fellow citizens; and what we, as professional musicians, may contribute to their lives.

Many of the projects we have executed over the past ten years are examples of this. Our project on teaching elderly people to learn to play an instrument, for example, showed us the important role that starting to play the saxophone at age 67 has for people, and denies the truth in the in professional music circles often flatly accepted axiom that there is no use in taking up the violin after the age of eight.

It is why we are carrying out a research project into the future of the brass orchestras in the North of the Netherlands. Because we see what is happening there and are worried about it, and together with the key players from that world we want to prepare the future conductors of those wind bands to operate in a context where those orchestras continue to fulfil the important societal role they have fulfilled in the past: allowing people to make music, allowing people to meet each other, allowing people to live a musically fulfilling life, allowing communities to celebrate their highlights.

It is the reason why we carry out research on the role music may play in the lives of people with dementia. Not because we believe that people with dementia need Art, but because we believe that through music people with dementia are empowered to show who they are musically. To affirm their

self, a self that is lost to them in so many different ways and that can be reclaimed so powerfully – if only for a moment or two – through music.

And it is the reason why I am currently carrying out a research project on a shanty choir and therefore have joined it. Not because I am deeply interested in the artistic qualities of shanties and sea songs – although singing them on Tuesday nights brings me a fulfilment which I would not hesitate to describe as also a deeply aesthetic experience – but because I want to understand what exactly this shanty choir brings to my fellow-members. How such a choir enables them to affirm, connect and regulate themselves, and thus live a fully musical life. In order to, eventually, connect my findings to what we might teach our students in the conservatoire.

Conclusion

That, then, is my 'project'. Looking at anyone as a possible audience member. Creating new work, yes, of course. But also: creating a new professional ethics. An 'other-centered' professional music ethics. An ethics in which we learn our students, our future professional musicians, to think about the Other, and about what is musically meaningful on their terms, which may not always be our terms. In the terms of Marilynne Robinson: the idea that "[w]hen you encounter another person, when you have dealings with anyone at all, it is as if a question is being put to you". It means for the conservatoire – which I described as a beautiful but also as a potential dangerous place – a radical openness. It means a different way of looking at what teaching is, and what learning is. It means introducing new topics of study, opening new fields of practice.

It means attaching ourselves to the great initiatives happening in the outside world: to Music for Life working with people with dementia, to Music Generations, that intergenerational song festival, to the world of community music, to our North-Netherlands Orchestra and its ABBA- and Beatles-concerts, to new allies in music education.

I hope I may contribute the coming years to that openness I described earlier. To contribute to taking the other seriously, even if her identity is very different from our own. That project connects directly to my identity as a researcher. An identity defined by looking at music as a social phenomenon; by practice theory; by ethnomusicology and anthropology; by qualitative research, especially ethnography. I am looking forward to doing that with the members of our research group, and with my dear colleague Rineke, who has led the group for ten years now. I am looking forward to doing that in the Prince Claus Conservatoire, the conservatoire that has the trust to appoint me as a professor who sometimes is their musical other in their midst. I am looking forward to doing that together with my colleagues Anne and Anke from the Research Centre Art & Society, for which I will function as 'leading lector' from next year on. And I am looking forward to doing that within my cherished Hanzehogeschool Groningen, a university of applied sciences whose motto "Share Your Talent – Move the World" says it all.

In that vein, would like to quote one of my favorite researchers, anthropologist Clifford Geertz. It is a quote which in the past few years has grown into a sort of personal motto, because I feel it reflects one of the basic needs of our so complex society. I hope my research may

“enlarge the possibility of intelligible discourse between people quite different from one another in interest, outlook, wealth, and power, and yet contained in a world where tumbled as they are into endless connection, it is increasingly difficult to get out of each other’s way”.

At the end of this lecture, I am supposed to say the words many professors say at the end of their lecture.: “Zo gezegd, zo gedaan” – “No sooner said than done”. I must confess that I am a bit ambivalent about this little sentence, that seems to attach more importance to the doing than to the reflecting, something which precisely may be the problem with many of the ‘professionals’ our university of applied sciences trains. I agree that it is good to realize that practice-based research in the end should lead to results in the real world. “It is mei sizzen net te dwaen”, you can’t do it by saying it, the Frisians say. On the other hand, I mentioned earlier that saying is very often a form of doing, and that unreflected saying and doing do no more than replicate our culture, a culture which we also, as researchers, from time to time should fundamentally criticize. I know that is “easier said than done” (“makkelijker gezegd dan gedaan”), to use another saying. It is therefore that I propose to end this lecture with a caution fitting our context: “think first, act later” (“eerst denken, dan doen”). Then to be followed, finally, by a well-meant “No sooner said than done” - “Zo gezegd, zo gedaan.”