

Music as Epistemology: *from a letter to a Finnish theoretician*

(notes taken in Nantes, January 1998)

A couple of nights ago I just couldn't sleep because of the many thoughts that were going through my head. I wrote them down at about 4:00 AM, and below I've written some basic sketches which will be of use in the opening chapter of my doctorate which attempts to define music as an *episteme* (see Foucault: The Order of Things) before approaching individual musical signs and contexts in the following chapters. Many of the things I am saying may be familiar to you through my previous work, although it is bringing them together and seeing the relations which is important for me. I am aware that your own theoretical perspective is quite different to mine, but at the same time I am aware of your openness to alternative ideas and things, i.e. thanks to you I was able to lecture and perform in Helsinki. As a linguist, I've actually fallen in love with the Finnish language, something which I share with the director of the performance I came to Nantes to see. I promise you that one day, when I have a little more time, I will get hold of a Finnish language course and start learning.

There are two major statements which I have to begin with concerning what my approach stands in opposition to in terms of a great deal of (academic) western culture. The first of these statements is our culture's desire to view music as a 'thing' or an 'object', something transcendent of its performance.¹¹ This may be in the form of a score-or a CD, and as I shall explain this is a tendency inherent in western thought, certainly not applicable to music outside the western world and not even to the music in it (as far as my theory sees it). I might add that this is not always the case in academia, especially concerning dance and multi-media forms such as music-videos and interactive CD-roms, but unfortunately there are a very small number of researchers working in this area.

As far as I see it, this is a result of a longing for 'static' knowledge, something which is graspable and made eternal in the form of a book, dictionary or an encyclopaedia: we can even now hold knowledge permanently in a digital form. This longing for permanence and stability comes from the acceptance of science without question as the 'ultimate truth' (I'm talking here about general, not academic, opinion). Western philosophy has told us that reality is graspable because of certain rules and laws, and we desire still—despite phenomenology and the destabilising nature of quantum physics—to hold on to these laws and experience them as permanent and true. I believe that our obsession with music as a transcendent form comes from this

¹¹ I'm sure this will sound dreadfully familiar to you!

same *episteme*. In this regard, I can thank my co-supervisor Saskia Kersenboom for a great deal of this theoretical perspective—you must invite her to come and speak/perform (Tamil dance) in Imatra: I'm sure her work would illicit a lot of interest, especially thanks to her interest in interactive learning through interactive multi-media.

The second major statement involves a comparison between the static and flowing nature of social change. Here I'm forced to adopt a rather Marxist approach, but in terms of analysing the function of art in culture it's sometimes very difficult not to. The basic theory is that as society changes, so does its art and its music. A static society is a dead society, one with little or no new art. This may seem obvious, and this approach to societal/ artistic change is one I share, but unfortunately a coin has always two sides. According to an article written for 'a conference in Australia on art 'education,'² the individual, especially in this world of fast moving change where we are often painfully aware of our short lifespan, since many of us (thanks to the 'truth' of science) have no religious basis to fall back upon, longs to be surrounded by recognisable stasis. This stasis becomes concrete in the form of art which may have been important in the development of an era long gone, but which doesn't reflect the dynamic nature of the contemporary world. Although De Smet is referring to the graphic arts, I am of the opinion that this is why certain societal levels within our culture have a longing for the music of the past. We have developed through the ages a sort of 'hero worship' for composers long dead who achieved this status because their music is taught in particular establishments and attached to particular cultural values: the music itself in certain cultural contexts may be considered 'beautiful', but beauty, a long argued notion, is very much in the eye of the beholder, as it is said. Because of this, it is difficult to support theoretically that the music taught in Conservatories has more value than any other form of music, no matter how many years one may have to be familiar with the music and to learn an instrument in order to be able to comprehend it, literally to 'hear and feel it as music'.

Although I'm trying to avoid too much Marxist ideology, our society has made distinctions between those who 'work' (fulfilling the materialistic needs of the society) and those who 'perform' (fulfilling the artistic needs of society). Unlike our society, most Balinese people can also play musical instruments and dance. They have to in order to perform the enormous amount of rituals which are necessary in everyday life.³ We believe in the context of our culture, quite correctly, that only people who are specially trained can perform these music and dance traditions, but in Bali everyone participates from a young age. It is also interesting to note that in one or all of the Indian languages the word 'work' includes performing rituals, which means playing music and dancing.⁴ This type of 'work' is considered no less valuable than the work one does in clearing the fields or milking the cows, to give a few inane examples. In a punk-rock band, the musicians are filling a very particular ritual role which performs very particular functions in our society which could be

² Written by Chantal De Smet, assistant to the Flemish Minister of Education, translated into English by Z. Laskewicz

³ Although I must confess that there are those who are particularly good at what they do as dancers or musicians, and also become famous around the island.

compared to ritual functions. It is unfortunate that many people, even those working in academic institutions, feel that if you play classical music you play 'finer' music of higher value than if you play in a punk-rock band—I would suggest that if we look at it from a phenomenological/ sociological perspective, the latter is more important than the former.

Attempting not to exaggerate the truth, our belief is that formal western music is transcendent of its time, that it has eternal value. Otherwise we wouldn't play it: it's obviously no use playing music with no social value, so we must believe that music composed in a social period long past can still have value today. It is either this or the far more problematic stance that our music has eternal beauty which has to be upheld by every generation to be 'saved' from the horrors of social change, and which therefore transcends time and culture.

I tend to agree with the first of the positions mentioned in the paragraph above: eternity and transcendence are for me things of the past. My own opinion is that in performing 'classical' music they are representing our society's longing for stasis, for an absence of change, accepting as superior music which emerges from a totally different *episteme*, based on a totally different ideology. By resurrecting this music certain ways of experiencing reality are brought back, better days when things didn't occur so quickly. We imagine as being much more tranquil the time before the post-modern age of dynamic and frantic, almost schizophrenic, change. Let's face it: the majority of people who are brought up in an economically better-off level of our society would much prefer to hear Mozart than the Sex Pistols.⁵⁵ As mentioned, my true belief is that there is no transcendentalism, no permanence, no universality. For example, Javanese people find it very hard to experience an orchestra as music: it sounds like noise to them.⁶⁶ Japanese or Chinese people who become famous artists on western instruments and western music do so because they have been brought up in a western-style environment (the conservatory - an institution which is embedded in a western epistemology).

After those statements, I would like to add one small note before moving on the major points: I believe that 'music' is an intensely complicated social phenomena which can't be summarised into all-encompassing theory. The points I am attempting to make here are intended simple to explore unfamiliar territory, in particular the relationship between movement and 'music', and to redefine some traditionally held notions about music. I don't believe that one person has the 'right' answer, that everyone has a piece of the answer, and that, we can learn from one another ultimately. Enough of that, on to the major points. As you know, and as I've mentioned in this letter, I see music as being so much more than simply a 'thing' or rather 'something' which can be analysed and dissected. Maybe I'll find a better term one day, because I'm referring here to both music and dance, but again I'm going to use the term *musical experience*. There are four major points which emphasise the different ways I see of interpreting musical experience. They are certainly related, and they still have to be much further developed, but I hope you get the basic idea of what I'm doing.

⁴ See *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, PAJ (1982).

⁵ The Sex Pistols, are of course, also important icons of our musical past, one which longed for social change in England and stood against the ridiculously conservative society which reigned at the time.

(i) Musical Experience as a Social Filter

By determining what 'music' and 'dance' actually are, we make certain decisions about our society, certain value judgments which are representative of our inner-selves. For example, someone that thinks that pop music is fantastic but cannot experience the music of Mozart, has had a certain type of education and comes from a certain social class, just as a Javanese person finds it difficult to listen to an orchestra because it is so loud, there are so many instruments and the repeating cycles occur so quickly that they are not able to hear any sort of 'musicality' in it at all. This is not because they are 'unmusical', it's just that their society has a totally different musical epistemology.

(ii) Dynamic Social Realisation of Space and Time

Musical experience fills space and time with sound and movement. It makes the presence real and sensuous and has a special effect on both dimensions, teaching us about their relativity, how we experience them depends on particular circumstances. When music fills a space we can no longer experience that space in the same way as before the music began, be that in a Balinese temple or a French restaurant. If we dance in a disco a gradual feeling of intensity and trance develops between the dancers, reminiscent of Tarantella dance in Southern Italy and Balinese trance dances. Music and dance function also to make a space *communal*, to give it life for a group and allow them to experience a moment of space and time together. For this whole section we can refer to phenomenology and post-Merleau-Pontian philosophy, and especially the work of Saskia Kersenboom.⁷

(iii) Musical Experience as a Tool of Memory

By knowing certain music or dance pieces, we can refer to the past. Even without hearing them they become tools for experiencing particular times and places, dynamic moments in the past. Music and dance, which exist as pieces in our mind, are even stronger tools when we hear them live, bringing with them the potential of the past (here I was influenced by Heidegger's *Dasein*⁸ and its relation to the past). As we are experiencing the present, music and the dance literally "throw" us into the past: music is not just the presence, but the past as well, although here we're referring to the past of the experiencer and *not* the dancer or composer.

⁶ See *A Musical Icon: Power and Meaning in Javanese Gamelan Music*, University of Texas Press (1979).

⁷ Kersenboom, Saskia (1995) *Word, Sound, Image: The Life of the Tamil Text*, Berg Publishers.

⁸ "Dasein involves itself in all kinds of projects and plans for the future. In a sense it is always ahead of itself. At the same time it must come to terms with certain matters over which it has not control, element that loom behind it, as it were, appurtenances of the past out of which Dasein is protected or thrown.' Dasein has a history. More it is its own past."

(iv) Music as a teacher of the presence

Both music and dance, as mediums in our society, act to teach individuals. They teach us how to experience space and time as it is realised *in the presence*. I am of the opinion that music and its music videos, especially the new form *techno*, teaches the young people of today to experience the constantly changing nature of the post-modern world. Balinese 'ritual' music (which is actually mostly music from the twentieth century) still plays a traditional role: it has a great deal of religious significance to *the* Balinese of today, who still perform rituals (combing, of course, music and dance) to appease and entertain the constant array of gods and demons who come to visit their temples. This traditional music, however, is also used by young people in their own 'educational' practices. Possibly thanks to the fact that the music is so loud, fast and quick-changing⁹ Balinese youth have a great desire to combine their music and dance with popular western forms, adapting it to their lives, teaching them to experience the changes which are constantly surrounding them, to adapt to contemporary life. This is quite remarkable.¹⁰ Compared to Bali, however, we cannot discuss the type change mentioned above to the same degree when referring to Java: the world has changed too quickly for them, and the slow moving recurring cycles and almost mystically paced dance is not significant anymore in teaching them to appreciate the gradual change of seasons and Hindu-Buddhist notions of cyclical time, as it once was before the violent intrusion of (Dutch) colonialism.¹¹ The strict symmetricism of Bharata Natyam, an ancient form of Indian dance, also teaches the dancer to experience presence in a special way, one probably connected to the recurring cycles of Hinduism (among other things) which unfortunately the context of this letter does not allow.

pg. 24, Krefl, D. "The Question of Being" in Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings, Routledge and Kegan Paul (1975).

⁹ Perhaps as a result of Balinese states constantly at war with one another and the existence of so many evil demons which have to be scared away with loud noises!

¹⁰ I've even recently heard a short passage from an aria taken from 'Madame Butterfly', but this type of fusion occurs extremely rarely

¹¹ We can even discuss a new form of music which developed during the colonial era: Krontjong, a form which became enormously popular. Influenced by Portuguese Fado mostly a female singer with a musical accompaniment sings extremely romantic songs in Indonesian, evoking an exoticism which could only come from colonialism: this suggests that the Javanese gained from the Europeans an image of themselves as an 'exotic' oriental culture, a notion so deeply entrenched that it could affect their musical forms.