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The king is naked: The musicological unified field and its articulation

All music is folk music, all categories are folk categories. Leastways, one might add, I never heard of no horse making them. Categories, I mean. Zoömusicologists will probably find the famous statement by Louis Armstrong (or was it Big Bill Broonzy?) definitely anthropocentric, and neuroscientists may feel the same about my addition (or parody) about categories. But whatever we think about the horse's mind, we have to acknowledge that categorizing is a human activity grounded in our bodies, in our perception of – and relation with – our environment, including other humans, and in our memory of past experiences and projection towards the future. In short, categories are based on our bodily experience, on our relation with the community we live in, its history, its politics, its ideology. Music types, or genres, make no exception. In the West there has been in the last hundred years (and currently is) a wide consensus about the division of music (let's forget for a minute what this word means) into three main kinds: 'art music', 'folk music', 'popular music'. The fact that this taxonomy is widely accepted doesn't mean that it really makes sense, even for those who seem to believe in it. First, even in the West, different names are used for the three categories in different languages, and to some respect linguistic differences account for taxonomic discrepancies (think of the usage of 'música popular', 'musica popolare' or 'musique populaire' in neo-latin languages). Second, even in the same language the three categories have different names, depending on the community and its ideology ('art', or 'classical', or 'serious' music? 'Folk' music or 'traditional' music?). Third, the taxonomy doesn't seem to include all musics that belong to the experience of the heterogeneous community that seems to accept it. Is jazz 'art' music, 'folk' music or 'popular' music? Or

is some jazz 'art', and some 'pop'? Is blues 'folk'? Are Indian or Arab classical musics 'classical', or 'traditional'? What about 'unpopular popular music'? What about 'music without definitions and boundaries' (or 'musiques actuelles'), for which dozens of festivals exists in Europe and North America, often presenting the same musicians? This multiplicity, with its contradictions, is a gold mine for scholars willing to understand the material, social, political, ideological, historical conditions under which such taxonomies are created. Coarser (like the one we are now discussing) or finer taxonomies (like those at the base of genres and subgenres, or even at the level of a single artist's repertoire) are equally interesting, though offering different perspectives.

But one thing is striking me. With the notable exception of a few recent conferences and round tables (including this one), and of individual essays, scholars do not seem to be interested in a critique of the dominating coarser taxonomy: not, at least, to the extent that this critique may undermine the foundations of the existing musicological disciplines, which are deeply related to that taxonomy.

It's comprehensible, as academic power (on which the lives of individual scholars depend) is rooted in disciplinary divisions. If ethnomusicology is more a matter of method than of repertoire, why not study (recalling Blacking) the rituals of an operatic première, or the microsocial interactions in a symphony orchestra, or the role of oral transmission in 'art' music? Or Beethoven's improvisations? Or Charlie Parker's improvisations? Or the repertoires of 'beach guitarists'? But would such an ethnomusicologist, or music anthropologist, make an academic career with similar interests, so different from the discipline's traditional mainstream (the ambiguity of the adjective is intended)?

And would a popular music scholar acquire visibility in his or her own field (popular music studies) making research on the download of 'classical' music mp3 files, and discussing the ways the community of downloaders copes with the pop-oriented tag structure currently in use? Or commenting how 'serious' music is broadcast on radio and tv? And would such research give him or her access to the community of historical or analytic musicologists?

I don't need to complete the picture, for the sake of balance or political correctness, with similar examples about musicologists *tout court*. They are the majority, they have the academic power, most of them speak about universals and are convinced they are the people who determine which universals exist. The late nineteenth century canon removed improvisation from the practice (and study) of 'art' music, so improvisation simply doesn't exist, even if there are lots of documents (textual and musical) available for research. To the extent that repertoires other than the canon exist in written form, they can be studied: again, there aren't great career expectations for young musicologists studying Frank Zappa's scores (and if you want to be really marginal, just deal with operetta, zarzuela or musical comedy). So, even fundamental aspects of the 'classical' repertoire (just think of the role of improvisation in Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt) are not covered to pay respect to the existing taxonomy.

Of course we all know this: the king is naked. So, pretending not to see him, most of us prefer to behave schizophrenically. With one mind, we acknowledge that the boundaries of our disciplines are fuzzy, that walls are crumbling (there is even some theoretical evidence that they cannot exist!); with the other mind, we keep at safe distance from those non-existing walls. You never know: we might be injured by the crumbling!

As a few readers/listeners know, in my writings about genres and music categories I have always maintained that I was not interested in creating a new, 'scientific' taxonomy: the main purpose of my study has been to understand music taxonomies 'as they are', to see how communities organize their musical universe, and how the way it is articulated varies with the passing of time, according to the internal dialectics of communities and with changes in material and cultural conditions. I have been interested in music categories precisely as 'folk categories', even if some categories (or some of their aspects) may not be structured as folk categories proper (just think of genre rules articulated in laws or in aesthetic manifestoes). However, recent debates about disciplinary boundaries and their fuzziness (and the related schizophrenic attitude I described above) make me think that one possible

solution – and maybe the only one – to the problems related with the historical division into three main ‘kinds of music’, and thus of music studies into three disciplines, is simply to throw it away.

My suggestion is, that it should be substituted with a much finer taxonomy of music facts or events (‘activities with or around sounds’, according to Gino Stefani: see also my definition of ‘genre’ in “A Theory of Music Genres: Two Applications”, <http://www.tagg.org/others/ffabbri81a.html>), covering (theoretically, and possibly) all music events on the planet. Each music event should be identifiable by a set of properties, and events with common properties could be associated into types. Musicology should be the discipline studying any of such events, though it is reasonable to assume that it should then be divided into sub-disciplines, studying certain types of events, or events that can be approached according to a specific method. So we wouldn’t throw away the baby of existing disciplines with the bath water of contradictory historical taxonomies, but we would probably discover how much of the existing musical universe was uncovered by those taxonomies/disciplines.

Of course, I’m talking about a ‘scientific’ taxonomy, based on the traditional/historical structure of property-based *taxa*, quite different from the way types and categories are built by the human mind in everyday life. Personally, I’m quite convinced that cognitive linguists are right when they describe the ways categories are created in our bodies and minds: I’m a devout reader of Mark Johnson’s and George Lakoff’s essays, I know that in real life we do not think of categories as slots where to put objects according to sets of properties. However, a profound understanding of how categorizing works in our minds doesn’t prohibit creating property-based taxonomies for specific purposes. The *taxa* of biology are still very useful in scientific study, and in actions to preserve our planet’s biodiversity, even if we have discovered that when we scream at the view of a possibly offending ‘insect’ we are not thinking in terms of arthropods and the distinct subordinate categories of insects and arachnids, but of the folk category of ‘insects’ (that apparently includes spiders).

What I envision is a (multidimensional, of course) layer of music types, that could be mapped to a separate entity, that is, the existing articulation of 'folk categories' or (in my terms) the way the musical universe is articulated by communities into genres. I don't pretend that such a taxonomy (the multidimensional layer of music types) be devoid of ideology: but I believe that it would be a giant step forward to clarify and minimize the impact of ideology on disciplinary definitions.

I also think that the job can't be accomplished by an individual, or even by a restricted group: this is a kind of genome project (nothing, or very little to do with the music enterprise with the same name) that can only be developed with the aid of the whole musicological community. Previous endeavours of creating 'universal' music taxonomies (see for example Charles Seeger's "Toward a Unitary Field Theory for Musicology", in *Selected Reports*, Volume 1, No. 3, Los Angeles: University of California, 1970) collapsed because of individual inclinations and tastes.

It may turn out to be a huge useless work. Or, as soon as the basic network of properties and types is laid down, we may discover that many new possibilities are open, and we may wonder how we could make without it. Yes, as Richard Middleton says, we only have to lose our (disciplinary) chains.