

Carl Dahlhaus: "Does 'music' (in the singular) exist?"

(originally published as "Gibt es 'die' Musik?," in Carl Dahlhaus and Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht, *Was ist Musik?*, Taschenbücher zur Musikwissenschaft 100, ed. R. Schaal (Wilhelmshaven, 1985, pp. 9-17); a translation also in "Music -- or Musics?," Robert P. Morgan, ed., *Strunk's Source Readings in Music History*, revised edn., vol. 7 ("The Twentieth Century") (New York, 1998), 239-244)

The idea of a world history of music is one on which a UNESCO plan is based. It is a plan from which – despite mounting difficulties, of an intrinsic and extrinsic nature – one does not want to dissociate oneself. The idea itself confronts a double obstacle: the vagueness of the concept "music" and the ideological implications of the notion of a "world history". And the one difficulty is closely related to the other: one cannot begin to formulate the problem of whether "music", in the singular, actually exists (at any rate, not in a way that invites a foreseeable solution) without a clear idea of whether and in what sense "history", in the singular, is a reality or a mere figment of the imagination.

The linguistic convention that proscribes making a plural from the word "music" has been increasingly ignored in recent years, thanks to pressure from the difficulty of clinging to the singular, without the attendant stylistic discomfort, which is also discomfort about substance, having been eliminated. The naivety with which the nineteenth century still either dismissed the musical "other" or unconsciously assimilated it has disappeared or at least diminished. As a result, both social and ethnic as well as historical differences prove so huge that one feels forced to abandon a unified concept of music.

For several decades a controversy has been conducted, with unchanging arguments, in terms of a dichotomy between light and serious music, and the terminological problems associated with that socio-aesthetic difference are so closely bound up with notions and decisions that directly impinge on social practice that the former seem like a theoretical reflection of the latter. The quarrel about the social functions and aesthetic criteria of light and serious music would not be possible if the sonic phenomena, which are kept apart from one another through classification, were not at the same time bracketed together by the umbrella term "music". As a comparison with other spheres shows, however, the notion that a pop song and a twelve-tone composition belong to the same category by no means goes without saying. No-one describes newspapers as "literature", although since a newspaper is printed language, the unusual application of the term would hardly be absurd from an etymological point of view. (The linguistic umbrella term for newspapers and poems, "text types" [*Textsorten*], has not become common parlance.) And linguistic

convention is both cause and effect of the fact that it is not customary to compare the social functions and aesthetic criteria of newspapers and poems. Yet twelve-tone compositions are subjected to comparison with products of the musical entertainment industry via listener statistics, from which practical consequences are drawn. The “spell cast by language” [*Verhexung durch die Sprache*] (Ludwig Wittgenstein) – in this case, by the precarious and questionable singular “music” – precludes a differentiation that is quite natural in the case of the printed word (but which is supposed to be rendered ideologically suspect by the term “text types”, itself an expression with pretensions toward neutrality but underpinned by a “counter-ideology”: commensurability instead of incommensurability). The dissimilar categorization of language and music can be explained pragmatically. Since no vernacular exists in music, pop song and twelve-tone composition are unwittingly subsumed under the same category, both of them creations equally removed from everyday reality. Yet to explain the convention of talking about music (in the singular) in historical-cum-socio-psychological terms is scarcely to provide an aesthetic justification. Although it might still give one pause, the plural would be more realistic.

If the consequences arising from the collective singular impinge in a direct and far-reaching way on musico-social reality – a reality defined by the dichotomy between light and serious music, whereby the neutralizing word “music” represents a more serious problem than the disputed signifiers “light” and “serious” – in the case of ethnic and regional differences, the questionable consequences of a universal and neutralizing concept of music are apparent less in practice than in theory. Sonic phenomena for which a European observer reserves the term “music” – a word for which a linguistic equivalent is often missing in non-European cultures – are deprived of their original meaning by being divorced from their “extra-musical” context. The context of which they are inextricably a part is, strictly speaking, neither “musical” nor “extra-musical”. The former expression [that is, “musical”] stretches the concept of music, a concept of European origin, to such an extent that it no longer corresponds with European reality, while the latter [“extra-musical”] presupposes a concept of music that is not only European but specifically modern. This latter concept of music, which in a strict sense dates back only to the eighteenth century, crudely distorts non-European musical reality – a reality not just of sonic facts but also of the consciousness of them.

Following the criteria of the category “music”, it is possible to abstract certain traits from complex cultural processes as “specifically musical”. But it is an abstraction made only in certain cultures and not in others. One is faced, accordingly, with a gloomy alternative: either to reinterpret and expand the European concept of music to the point of alienating it from its origins, or to exclude the sonic creations of a number of non-European cultures from the concept of music. Deciding one way would be precarious in terms of the history of ideas. Deciding the other way would

invite the charge of being Eurocentric (as a rule most Africans, even if they emphasize the *négritude* of their culture, do not wish to relinquish “music” as a label of prestige). And a way out of the dilemma is to be found only by relating the ethnological problems to the historical ones, that is, by attempting to solve any difficulties by first increasing them.

However substantial they may have been, the differences between the epochs of European music history did not affect the inner unity of the concept of music in any essential way so long as the tradition of the ancient world obtained: a tradition whose essential ingredient was the principle of a musical system of tones [*Tonsystem*] underpinning various styles and comprising direct and indirect relations of consonance. (The principle may not be specifically European, but that does not change the fact that it formed the essential link in the chain of historical continuity from Antiquity via the Middle Ages through the Modern Age. What is specific – contrary to the prejudice elicited by the method of determination by demarcation – is not always what is essential.)

It was electronic music and “composition with timbres” [*Klangkomposition*] inspired by John Cage that first provoked the question whether sonic phenomena that renounce the musical system of tones can still be considered music according to the European tradition. At the same time, the counter-response seemed plausible: electronic music perpetuated that tradition insofar as the issues it addressed continued a line of historical development. It is thus possible to interpret the idea of “composing” tone colours (assembling them from sinus tones or filtering them out of white noise) as an extreme manifestation of the tendency toward rationalization in which Max Weber claimed to identify a law governing the development of European music: a tendency to control nature, the composer’s power over his musical material [*Tonstoff*] or, put in Hanslick’s terms, the power of “intellect” [*Geist*] over “material capable of intellectual manipulation” [*geistfähiges Material*]. And guided at the outset by the axioms of serialism, one was able to establish a direct connection with the current state of development reached by avant-garde composition. Electronic music indubitably became the preserve of composers rather than physicists and engineers. Hence it came under the category of music in the modern European sense, inasmuch as that category is understood as a historically changeable one, defined and continually redefined by the work of composers.

The social, ethnic and historical differences that appear to force an abandonment of the concept of music seem scarcely reconcilable. If one nonetheless refrains from completely relinquishing the idea which the collective singular either expresses or intimates, then a plausible premise for any attempt at “restitution” would be that the idea of “music” in the singular was ultimately grounded in Hegel’s conception of world history: a world history which began in the Near East and travelled via Greece and Rome to the peoples of the Romance and Germanic lands. Hegel’s construction

undoubtedly suffers from being Eurocentric. Yet to make the charge 150 years later is as futile as it is easy. More germane than that manifest shortcoming is the less obvious fact that the anthropological idea which informs Hegel's idealistic conception of history [*geschichtsfilosofische Konzeption*] is by no means obsolete: the idea that a culture – even a musical culture – of earlier epochs and other parts of the world “belongs to world history” to the extent that it participates in the development that around 1800 one called “education toward humanity”. The concept of history or world history (in the singular) – a rigorously selective category which excludes from history proper as mere detritus the greater part of what occurred in former times – is only conceivable when one realizes that it aligned itself with the classical idea of humanity (in precarious relation to the development of science, technology and industry, which similarly constructed “history” in the singular, free from ethnic and social differences).

The concept of world history, at least with regard to earlier epochs, can scarcely be justified in pragmatic terms: the Japanese, Indian and West European cultures of the fourteenth century scarcely permit the construction either of an external, empirical framework or of a unifying *Zeitgeist*. The “simultaneity” is chronologically abstract, not historically concrete. It is only in the twentieth century that the continents have grown together, thanks to economic, technological and political independence, to form a single world whose structure makes it historiographically viable to write world history in the pragmatic sense of the word: a history which also includes that of music on account of the external connection between cultures being irrefutable, even though any intrinsic one is often questionable, such as the craze for Indian music.

The idealistic concept of world history need not be relinquished, so long as one radically modifies it. It is no longer possible to determine in a dogmatic fashion what a step in the direction of “education toward humanity” should be – from the perspective, that is, of a “global citizen” around 1800, which turns out to be the enlightened bourgeoisie masquerading as the ideal of humanity. “Humanity” in the singular no more exists than “history” in the singular. What remains is patient understanding, which not only tolerates the “other” precisely on account of its initially disconcerting otherness (tolerance can imply disparagement) but also respects it.

According to twentieth-century criteria, which are probably not irrevocable, humanity consists less in making the heterogeneous more homogeneous than in mutual acceptance wherever difference appears insoluble. If so, the search in music aesthetics, as a derivation of the idea of humanity, for a common substratum present in the sonic phenomena of all ages and continents is of less significance than the awareness and mutual recognition of utterly different principles of formation: more crucial than the elements and basic patterns are the consequences and

differentiations. Whether the principle of consonance and alternating rhythm can be counted, as some historians and ethnomusicologists believe, as “innate ideas” which are merely being forever “transformed”, or whether one accepts, as irreducible and equally valid principles, the size of intervals alongside relations of consonance as well as metric or quantitative alongside alternating rhythm, is less significant than the appreciation of a substantial dissimilarity of formations or “transformations” [Überformungen] constructed on common or differing foundations. Grounding the concept of “music” (in the singular) as a “natural given”, whether in musically objective or anthropological structures, is a difficult and probably pointless enterprise, as long as one does not misuse the concept “transformation” without naming criteria for actually distinguishing between the “transformation” of common but indistinct foundations on the one hand and diffuse heterogeneity on the other. (Moreover, rather than opposing nature and history, one should adopt Fernand Braudel’s suggestion and draw a distinction between structures of long, medium and short duration.)

The driving force behind the idea of “music” (in the singular) – itself a result of “history” (in the singular) – was the classical utopia of humanity that formed in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* [Kritik der Urteilskraft] the basis of an aesthetics in which judgments of taste are “subjective” but nevertheless “common”, to the extent that subjectivity strives to converge with a *sensus communis*, a “common sense”. If, however, humanity finds expression less in the discovery of a common substance than in the principle of respecting untranscendable difference, one remains true to the idea of “music” (in the singular) by relinquishing it as a concept of substance in order to restore it as a regulative principle of mutual understanding.

Translated by Stephen Hinton