

Tragaki, D. (2019), *Music and the political: a dialogue with Martin Stokes*, *Rast Musicology Journal*, 7(2), s.2181-2186. Doi:<https://doi.org/10.12975/pp2181-2186>

Music and the political: a dialogue with Martin Stokes

Dafni Tragaki*

Martin Stokes**

Corresponding Author:

*Assistant Professor, Dept of History, Archaeology and Social Anthropology, Univ. of Thessaly, Greece. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9768-4116>, daphnetr@otenet.gr

** King Edward Professor of Music, King's College London.

About Conversation

The following conversation is what was humorously called a “jammin’ article”, which was an attempt to improvise a mostly theoretical dialogue on a variety of themes broadly defining Martin Stokes’ oeuvre until today. It is a sort of “free improvisation” produced in the course of spontaneous and rather intimate dialogic writing, as it developed as a non-prescriptive and open-ended process: there was no preset structure or any sort of detailed discussion about our writing strategy, neither any sophisticated editing. Moreover, it is in no way, neither has it aspired to become, an exhaustive overview of the plethora of issues pertaining Martin Stokes’ work, which besides would be impracticable given the article’s economy of words. Most important, such an overview would inevitably be incomplete, as Martin Stokes continues to be a prolific and highly impactful scholar and researcher. Instead, what follows is a specific knot of questions and reflections born out of the residuum of reading and digesting Stokes ever since the early stages of my ethnomusicological studies - questions and reflections also intuitively sculptured in the course of our “jamming”. I am deeply thankful to Martin Stokes for accepting my proposal.

Keywords

martin stokes, dialogue, ethnomusicologist, ethnomusicology

DT: In your entry for Grove Music on Line you wrote that “ethnomusicologists might be described as living in a post-theoretical environment, one shared by many in the social sciences and humanities”.¹ This is, I think, a very promising starting point for critically re-thinking ethnomusicological epistemologies at a time when disciplinary boundaries and certainties are increasingly questioned. All the while, for its more rigorous critics, ethnomusicology “lacks its own theory”, a critique, one could say, which perhaps also encapsulates implicit disciplinary politics. What sort of future challenges and prospects, more or less optimistic, does post-theoreticism and trans-disciplinarity—and what kind of trans-disciplinarity—currently pose for ethnomusicology and its theories? Do you

think that the impact of post-theoreticism as a theoretical condition could promote ethnomusicology’s institutional position, interface and sustainability within the academia and potentially amplify its resonance outside the field of music studies and in what ways?

MS: When has ethnomusicology ever ‘had its own theory’, and why do we, or at least some, feel the pressure to provide it now? The discipline, as I have always seen it at least, has to be understood in terms of dialectic between our local concerns and what we might call ‘metropolitan theory’ - trans-disciplinary reading that animates, excites and enlivens across disciplinary fields. There have certainly been periods of retrenchment, but then, more

characteristically, periods of engagement with, for example, structural linguistics, postcolonial theory and post-structuralism, cognitive science, histories of the senses. Both are I think necessary, in the sense that if we are committed to understanding the relationship between these assemblages we call 'music' (or 'sound' - an equally provisional label) and these assemblages we call 'culture', we need both, obviously, and shouldn't worry too much about 'pushing back' if the pendulum seems to be swinging too far in one direction or another. What is good, and exciting, is that the pendulum never quite swings back the same way...

The problem with the (dialectical) picture I've just painted is that it is a bit self-contained, and tends to privilege a particular kind of conversation between what I'm calling local concerns and metropolitan theory, perhaps an Anglophone, and university-based one. Ethnomusicology is done elsewhere, both geographically and professionally, of course. And it is one that probably reflects a certain moment in time, too, the mid-1980s, when I was doing my PhD and starting my academic teaching life at Queen's Belfast. This was the 'cultural studies' moment, whose tone was set by volumes like the Laurence Grossberg and Cary Nelson *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* volume of 1987. We had to read up on our Marx and Freud pretty quickly, check out the Birmingham school classics (Resistance Through Rituals, for instance), get our heads around Foucault and poststructuralism. I had a bit of a head start, coming out of my PhD work, with its own quite heavy (anthropological) investment in Bourdieu and in the Writing Culture debates. Having done so, conversation at Queen's, as at many other places, flowed between the Politics department, the English and other Humanities departments, anthropology, sociology and area studies. We called that conversation 'theory', and opposed it, in

our no doubt youthful and arrogant way, with what we imagined to be unreflective, business-as-usual, previous-generation disciplinary practice. It was wildly exciting. It seemed iconoclastic in some ways, but we were, of course, guided by older and wiser people who had their own answers to what it all meant for music study - Simon Frith and Richard Middleton among them, if I had to name two, but of course there were others.

That generational energy slightly ran out of steam around 2000, which was when I wrote about 'post-theoreticism' in the New Grove. At least, that was how it seemed to me then. One could explain it in part in generational terms (the 80s cultural-studies generation now in tenured jobs, 'youth' now middle-aged); in part in terms of a retrenchment (traditional music departments absorbing anthropologists like me, and ethnomusicologists, without necessarily becoming any less traditional - indeed, often intimating that their ability to absorb people like me validated their conservatism); in part the growing absurdities and stifling orthodoxies of identity politics (a door opened by a certain kind of 1980s cultural studies, though, please note, not one I would identify myself with); and in part in terms of a search for the next big thing that would define a generational shift.

That came with the cognitive turn in the early 2000s, accompanied by its own generation-busting rhetoric, straw-manning and what have you. It was interesting to me in the ways in which the cognitivists teamed up with the music theorists and analysts in music departments, and thus gained traction. The return it noisily announced to a depoliticized and dehistoricised empiricism and, somewhere in the mix, to 'the music itself' all rang very false to me. It worked with strategically under-informed understandings of what anthropologists mean by the word 'culture'

(and, consequently, ‘ethnography’ as a methodology). And it has seemed insufficiently attentive to the politics of big data approaches elsewhere. I said words to this effect at an AAWM meeting in London, in a plenary panel involving Ian Cross and Rick Cohn, and I put them in far more polemic terms than I perhaps needed to. I’m slightly embarrassed to recall that occasion now. But the reaction to those words in the discussion (and emails) afterwards indicated that many shared these views, and that opinions were hardening against the conjoined drift towards a certain kind of cognitivism, a certain kind of ‘empiricism’, a certain kind of embrace of big-data.

Now we are in the throes of the ontological turn. Even if I rather feel obliquely critiqued by this literature, I feel, as an ethnomusicologist, in recognizable and worldly theoretical territory once again. Those associated with it have picked up some of the energies delivered to our discipline(s) by sound studies, and taken them in new and challenging critical directions. Once again, we are unabashedly political, urgent and talkative (and writerly!) in tone, and expansive, if no longer attempting to generalize (let alone universalize) in our global frame of reference. Both the ‘sustainability’ and the ‘amplification’ of our disciplinary voices are well served by this turn, surely. There’s plenty I would want to argue about with where we find ourselves now, but I am suddenly feeling very positive again.

DT: I agree that sound studies is a theoretically energizing and challenging field, one that could also mobilize the disciplinary re-mapping of certain strands of ethnomusicology within the academia. I think that the work of an earlier generation - your generation - of scholars that you described whose work bridged anthropology, critical theory and ethnomusicology or musicology also

largely contributed to the formation of a solid ground for sound studies to develop, while further investing ethnomusicology’s theoretical and disciplinary legitimacy. Your writings, for instance, have launched a number of key analytical concepts and topics for the cultural study of popular music: cosmopolitanism and globalization, musical agency, gender and the nation, sentimentalism and the public sphere, mass-mediation, migration, citizenship, democracy and social justice...Admittedly, the majority of your work has been - and still is - highly influential for ethnomusicologists, and no less for music scholars attracted to ethnomusicological thought. These publications and lectures, notably the Bloch lectures and the IMR distinguished lecture series, promoted ethnomusicology’s networking with the sort of critical perspectives opened by scholars like Anna Tsing, Edward Said, Roland Barthes, Laurent Berlant, Michael Herzfeld, among others, advancing its creative engagement with post-structuralist and postcolonial theory, semiotics, cultural critique and political philosophy.

Obviously, the polyvalent analytical frameworks featuring your work supplied the sculpturing of an ethnomusicology that remains restlessly alert to the political. What is more interesting, I think, is that such critical engagement with the political is not simply a matter of interpreting music within its political context. There is a detour, in other words, away from the sort of schematic “text-context” analysis, where the “text” (music) is supposedly interactively shaped by the “context” (culture) - that is another situation, perhaps, of misreading “culture” (and “music”, may I say), don’t you think? In the conclusion, for instance, of your article “On Musical Cosmopolitanism” you stressed: “Musical cosmopolitanism may well be understood...as the product of certain kinds of intentionality and agency, which we might appropriately understand

politically and culturally. But to neglect the element of *pleasure* and *play* [my emphasis] in the global circulation of musical practice would, it seems to me, also be to make a serious mistake. If we were to embrace these elements more fully we might extend our understanding of the “political” and the “cultural” in useful and interesting ways”.² My impression is that there is a call for a theoretical shift in this argument, at least, in the way we think the political/cultural and its agencies through music. Of the way we think of music itself, too, I guess...

MS: Yes, there’s a familiar problem here of text and context, text understood as an assemblage or accumulation of polyvalent or ambiguous signs, made ‘political’ by its context. I’d say we are well beyond that, were it not for the frequency with which one still occasionally hears appeals to ‘the music itself’, and which one can perhaps excuse as an antidote to the reductive reflexes that often twitch when we talk about ‘the politics of music’. Power circulates, and circulates everywhere, as Foucault taught us to recognize. There is no point trying to pin down ‘the politics’ to any particular site, or space when we are talking about music, or anything else.

The quote you have (kindly) dug up is, at least for me, an important one. To neglect pleasure and play in musical transmission and innovation is inexcusable. That’s why I think it helps to be a musician, studying music - we know something, deep down, about the pleasure and play of things, and can recognize it when we see it. A politics is already there, in the deployment and distribution of bodies, voices, sounds, technologies. How often, though, it starts out as ‘fun’ (think of rap and hip-hop, for instance, particularly as it traveled outside the United States), and ends up unmistakably ‘political’, as a voice of protest, agitation, education, in the summoning of crowds, in the shaping of political slogans and language more

generally. A kind of ‘territorialisation’ I guess, if we want to look at it in Deleuzian terms, a process we have to attend to carefully. But to fail to see the politics in play before that process of territorialisation is a basic error.

I was lucky enough to study with Michael Gilsenan at Oxford (shortly before he left for New York). Though not a term he would have used, if disciplinary practice did not acknowledge ‘metropolitan theory’, in his view, it would be lost, and I never lost that outlook on life. As an anthropologist I was used to orienting myself to anthropological theory and all that was happening to it in the 1980s. And I guess I’ve always been a slightly chaotic and hyperactive reader. Excitable is probably the right word. That was probably why my voice was a slightly unusual one in those days. I would rather say I was deepening a groove established by others. If that’s how it’s seen, it’s a role I’m happy to have played. But of course people were finding their way to Said and others through other routes...

DT: I like the musical/performative metaphor you used for describing your own theoretical input: “deepening the groove established by others”. To my view, the Stokes’ “groove” created a radical theoretical scene, at least in the field of ethnomusicology, where the exploration of the political in popular music was staged next to “affect”/“sentimentalism”, “voice”, “citizenship”, “public sphere”, “nation”. In *“The Republic of Love”* (2010) all the above concepts are brought into synergy for further complicating the understanding of love’s politics through an intriguing, may I say, launching of Herzfeld’s “cultural intimacy” in ethnomusicology. Such a political concept of love, as Michael Hardt, among others, argued (Hardt 2011)³, invited us to reconsider conventional understandings of “love-song” as a form of cultural production supposedly detached from, even empty of political interest,

understandings apparently sustaining a modern logic of separating passions from reason, and to focus, instead, on love as a transformative force, one encapsulating the potential for subjective/social change, resistance and critique - love as an immersive, and contingently saturating, space of tension. The eroticization of power and its voicing by musical icons mediating and massively distributing love-song's affective economies in the public sphere (as exemplified in "*The Republic of Love*") opened the space for ground-breaking sensibilities, may I say, of affective subjectification in sound and of the engendering of citizenship in popular culture, which largely remained rather peripheral in music studies until then. "Talk about love engages power directly, not evasively" as you concluded in the book's introductory chapter (Stokes 2010, 33). And I found much-challenging your suggestion for a common theoretical framework for considering a "pan-Islamic culture of love stretching from Spain to India" (ibid., 28)...

MS: This is a more persuasive way of expressing something I was indeed trying to frame in *The Republic of Love*. Love is a way of imagining the social relationship at a variety of scales - the sexual, the domestic, the national, the cosmic. There are many cultural variables of course. But everywhere it seems to me one sees a mutability of scale in such imaginaries. 'Democracy begins with two', as Luce Irigaray put it. In other words, the power of love is a kind of scalar power; if we get it right at one level, there's the possibility we can get it right at others. This is the radical hope, the utopianism of love. On the other hand, this is also how it gets entangled with authoritarianism - one of Michael Herzfeld's key points. A great deal of violence, injustice, and repression is accompanied by appeals to love, to 'our ways of loving', as well as resistance to such appeals. Luc Boltanski understands

love as a kind of 'social competency'. Typically it takes political crisis of one kind or another to bring questions about how far such 'competencies', understood as more or less authoritative ways of representing love, might extend, and across what kind of social or political terrain, and this make it central to rather significant scenes of political debate and contest. The 17th century in western Europe, and indeed the Ottoman world (to bear in mind Walter Andrews and Mehmet Kalpaklı's book, *The Age of Beloveds*), was one such moment. The sexual revolutions of the 1960s in the west, the global neoliberal/populist turn late in the 20th century yet another. Music is not just a good way of sensing this, critically, but, I feel, a rather central component of such imaginaries in many cultures and historical moments. Why? Because it, too, operates in space of scalar indeterminacy and thus scalar contest. Music's affects are so often imagined as moving between the highly intimate to the cosmic and spiritual with 'the political' ambiguously in the middle. In western culture, Rousseau, in my reading, sets this kind of scalar imaginary in motion when he asks why, in the *Essai sur l'Origine des Langues*, Swiss soldiers should be moved to such melancholy by the song 'Ranz des Vaches', whilst he, though highly sympathetic to Alpine culture, should not. If music doesn't set our feelings in motion via sympathetic vibrations expanding across the universe, what is it, then, that makes music emotionally powerful on such a small scale, and, seemingly, within such distinct and localized boundaries? There are many other components to the western complex, but he poses a question that has never been quite settled, in my view, about how far music's affects range, and on what scale. It is not hard to see the political potency of 'love song' in this broad theoretical and historical context. As you recognize, it was an idea I tried to develop in *The Republic of Love*, and now one I'm trying to extend. My Bloch lectures at Berkeley, which I've still got to write up, were an attempt to

do that.

DT: I think that the sort of theoretical insights effectively probed in *The Republic of Love* and the Bloch lectures can further contribute to a break away from a disembodied analysis of music and its social worlds, away from the sort of “pure theory” determining what is knowable in music (as Steven Feld also noticed). By taking seriously the politics of desire and pleasure performed in sound we apparently open a pathway for a more “sensuous musicology” to rephrase Paul Stoller’s words. *The Republic of Love* provided a platform for “feeling theory” and for immersive cultural critique, I believe, and no less one for rethinking music’s disciplinarization and for exploring new sensibilities of popular music and its economies of knowledge. A platform for re-framing, eventually, musicology in pursuit of a radical disciplinary cosmopolitics, may I say, which is apparently a challenge kaleidoscopically met in *The Musical Citizen* IMR lectures (2017), where you put on a firm basis a set of critical questions and reflections upon popular music in the light of citizenship and affect theories, neoliberal governmentality, mediation and the public sphere...⁴ Do you think that it might be worth trying, perhaps, a more politically imaginative and, at the same time, sentimental theory for ethnomusicology (at least)?

MS: At the moment I can only offer a sentimentalist’s theorising, rather than a sentimental theory for ethnomusicology. Maybe that’s all I’ll ever be able to do, or anybody, perhaps. Let’s think of sentimentalism today, as a provocation of theory, rather than theory itself... One route is to seek perspective on the emotion-fuelled politics of the day. Anger, betrayal, the quasi erotic thrill of seeing career politicians and their experts humbled, undone by events, the system failing, the rule book torn up. I’m talking

about Brexit, but I could be talking about many other things in many other parts of the world. The gilets jaunes, for instance. To be able to deconstruct this rage, to see it as legible, in some sense, to understand it as a form of communication, to refuse, as intellectuals, to ‘other’ it, is a step towards the perspectival middle ground, and thus effective contestation, if we are to avoid a replay of the 1930s. This would be a sentimental provocation, in a critical sense. Another would be to think about scale. The equation that looked settled a decade ago - the right favours social imaginaries of the small scale (nation, family, conjugal coupledness, small town life), the left the large-scale (the regional bloc, the city, internationalism and cosmopolitanism) now looks much less settled. A sentimental challenge, if you will, would involve rethinking these relationships between large and small and their affective linkages. Music, as I’ve often argued, is where, in the modern world, we do emotional perspectivalism, where we think through emotional scale. It is where we might see subtle but serious quests, as I put it in my title for my Bloch Lectures at Berkeley a while back, borrowing Boltanski’s formulation, ‘for love and justice’.

DT: This is a loud challenge, Martin, also prioritizing a theoretical imperative for an intrinsically political and sentimentally engaged ethnomusicology, one at a constant state of disquiet and critically probing its own certainties (“the large” and “the small”, “the popular” and “the art”, or else), a kind of scholarship pressingly needed in late liberal Europe and across the world. Thank you.

Endnotes

1. “Contemporary Theoretical Issues”, p. 49
2. Stokes, Martin, 2007: 14.
3. Hardt, Michael. “For Love or Money”. *Cultural Anthropology* 26 (4): 676-682.
4. Available at <http://www.the-imr.uk/distinguished-lecture-series>